

# We Believe in God

LESSON  
ONE

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT GOD



Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, study guides and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### **ABOUT THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES**

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Third Millennium has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Third Millennium Ministries is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org)

# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Revelation &amp; Mysteries .....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Divine Revelation	2
1. Basic Concept	2
2. Types	4
B. Divine Mysteries	8
1. Basic Concept	9
2. Types	12
<b>III. Attributes &amp; Works .....</b>	<b>14</b>
A. Divine Attributes	15
1. Basic Concept	15
2. Types	18
B. Divine Works	20
1. Basic Concept	20
2. Types	23
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>24</b>

# **We Believe in God**

## **Lesson One**

### **What We Know About God**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

---

“Knowing God” means different things to different people — everything from experiencing personal intimacy with God, to witnessing his mighty works, to understanding facts about him that the Holy Spirit has revealed. Most of us realize that it’s valuable to have a personal relationship with God and to see him at work in the world. But unfortunately, many of us do not sense that it’s equally important to learn as many facts about God as we can. And it’s no wonder. Studying what traditional systematic theologians often call “the doctrine of God,” or “theology proper,” is so complex that it requires a great deal of effort. But as difficult as it may be, the more we learn about God, the more our personal relationship with him grows. And the more facts we know about him, the more our awareness of his work in the world grows. In fact, learning as much as we can about God strengthens every dimension of our Christian faith.

This is the first lesson in our series, *We Believe in God*, a series devoted to theology proper, or the study of God himself. We’ve entitled this lesson, “What We Know about God.” In this lesson we’ll introduce how evangelical systematic theologians have approached some of the most basic issues related to understanding who God is and what he does.

This introductory lesson on what we know about God will focus on two pairs of foundational issues. First, we’ll explore the revelation and mysteries of God — what God has disclosed about himself and what he’s hidden about himself. And second, we’ll examine God’s attributes and works — two of the main topics in traditional treatments of the doctrine of God. Let’s look first at God’s revelation and mysteries.

#### **REVELATION & MYSTERIES**

---

For the sake of simplicity, we’ll deal with the revelation and mysteries of God separately. We’ll begin with divine revelation, and then we’ll turn to divine mysteries. Let’s start with what Christians believe about God’s revelation, or his self-disclosure to the human race.

## **DIVINE REVELATION**

It would be difficult to imagine a more fundamental issue as we study the doctrine of God than divine revelation. What has God disclosed about himself? How has he done this? Our answers to these questions set the course for every facet of theology proper.

We'll introduce the idea of divine revelation in two ways. First, we'll introduce the basic Christian concept of revelation. And second, we'll look into the two main types of revelation that we must keep in mind as we learn about God. So, what is the basic concept of divine revelation?

### **Basic Concept**

For our purposes, we can summarize the basic Christian idea of divine revelation in this way:

**God's self-disclosure, always given in human terms and most fully given in Christ.**

Two facets of this concept deserve to be highlighted, beginning with the fact that God has always revealed himself in human terms.

**One of the most amazing things about the God of the Bible is actually, I believe, unique to the God of the Bible, and that is that he maintains all of his incommunicable attributes, or these infinite attributes, like sovereignty and eternality and infinity, in the midst of relating to creatures who are time-bound and finite and in history. And the great I AM, we're told, enters into time, space and human history in relationship with creatures and relates to them in a way that is on their level. It doesn't mean he sacrifices any of his all-knowing, infinite, eternal nature, but he relates to them right on a level where they are — much like we would do for a little child — and speaks to them on that level. I walk into our kitchen and see flour all over the place and say, "Honey, did something happen with the flour?" It's not because I don't know something happened with the flour, but I'm relating to my children right on a level where they are. And that's what God does for us in his grace. Amazing condescension of God leads to relating to us in a way that at times seems like he must be compromising some of his eternal infinite characteristics. But that's never the case. God's simply relating to us on our level because he loves us that much.**

**— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

We all know that we can't study God like we do so many other things in daily life. We can't measure his height and weight, or put him in a test tube and examine him. On the contrary, God is so transcendent, so far beyond us, that he'd be entirely hidden except for one fact: the Holy Spirit has revealed himself in human terms. Systematic theologians have often spoken of this as the anthropomorphic character of revelation. In other words, God has disclosed himself in human form, or in ways that human beings can understand.

There are at least four kinds of anthropomorphic revelation in the Scriptures. In the narrowest sense, the Scriptures often compare the characteristics of God with human characteristics. Numerous biblical passages speak of God as having eyes, ears, nostrils, arms, hands, legs and feet. God also reasons, asks questions, consults others, feels emotions and ponders. He takes action and relents, much like you and I do. But the Scriptures, as a whole, make it clear that these kinds of anthropomorphisms are to be taken as metaphors — comparisons between God and human beings. God doesn't have physical eyes or hands like people do. But we know, nonetheless, that he sees and accomplishes things all the time.

In a slightly broader sense, the Scriptures also present God anthropomorphically in terms of human social structures. For instance, the Bible frequently depicts God as the supreme King of creation. He sits on his throne in heaven, holds counsel, hears reports, makes announcements, sends messengers, and receives worship, similar to the ways human emperors did in biblical times.

Along these same lines, Scripture portrays God as Israel's royal warrior, the lawgiver, the covenant maker and the covenant keeper. He's the royal shepherd and the royal husband and father of his people. Once again, these revelations of God tell us that God is like human beings in certain ways. He rules in ways that are similar to the ways human kings ruled in the ancient world.

Even more broadly, we can say that God's visible appearances in history are also anthropomorphic. The Bible reports a number of times when God appeared visibly in the world — what we often call "theophanies." The most dramatic theophanies associated God with physical smoke and fire, and with visions of his visible heavenly cloud of glory. Now, passages like Colossians 1:15 and 1 Timothy 1:17 tell us that God himself is invisible. So, these visible appearances of God are also anthropomorphic in the sense that they don't present God as he knows himself. Rather, they present God in ways that we human beings can experience him with our limited capacities.

Finally, in the broadest sense, the Scriptures also reveal God in human terms even when they refer to his abstract qualities. The Bible often speaks of God as being just, holy, powerful, and the like. But biblical authors explained these abstract descriptions of God in human terms, in ways that we can understand. So, it's fair to say that in one way or another, all divine revelation is anthropomorphic. God has revealed truths about himself to the human race, but always in ways that accommodate our human limitations.

Keeping in mind that the Holy Spirit has always revealed God to us in human terms, let's look at a second basic feature of divine revelation: God has revealed himself most fully in Christ.

Certainly, there's nothing more central to the Christian faith than Christ himself. He alone is our Savior and our Lord. And he is God's supreme revelation of himself to the human race. Now, as Christ's followers, we acknowledge that God has revealed

himself in many ways throughout biblical history. But passages like Colossians 1:15 tell us that Jesus is God's ultimate disclosure of himself in human terms. Jesus is the incarnate, eternal Son of God, the perfect human image and representative of God. And for this reason, everything we believe about God must accord with God's supreme revelation in Jesus — in his teachings, as well as in the significance of his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and glorious return.

With this basic concept of divine revelation in mind, we should look further at God's self-disclosure by considering the different types of revelation that come from God.

## Types

As we've said, Jesus is God's supreme revelation. But in the New Testament record, Jesus made it clear that he is not God's only self-disclosure. Rather, he affirmed that God has revealed himself in a variety of ways.

**First of all, we can't come to know God unless he reveals himself to us, and he does so in a number of ways, simply through creation and the wonders of it as we look around it ourselves. He reveals himself to us in our relationships with other people who speak to us the things that they have learned about God. We are receiving this revelation from God on many different levels. Of course, for Christians, the most important is that, in his holy Word, God has revealed himself to us... So, we look around at ourselves and we see God revealed to us, we know he exists, and then he tells us about himself, through his disciples, to this day and through his holy Word.**

— Dr. Jeffery Moore

Systematic theology often identifies two types of God's revelation that Jesus himself acknowledged. The first type is often called general or natural revelation.

**General Revelation.** Simply put, the term general revelation refers to the biblical teaching that God has revealed himself to human beings through every experience of creation. In line with a number of Old Testament passages, like Psalm 19, Jesus himself frequently drew theological lessons from general revelation. He often used nature and common human activities, like farming and fishing, to teach about God. In fact, he repeatedly called on his disciples to look within and around themselves to discern what they could about God from their experiences of life.

We see something similar in places like Acts 14:17 and 17:28. In these verses, the apostle Paul followed Christ's example and appealed to general revelation. Here, he pointed Gentiles toward what they knew about God through reflection on nature and Greek poetry.

Romans 1 and 2 offer the most extensive explanation of general revelation in the Scriptures. These chapters draw attention to both positive and negative outlooks that we must keep in view as we explore theology proper. On the positive side, Romans 1 and 2 teaches that we can learn many things about God through our experiences of life in God's creation. Listen to what the apostle Paul said in Romans 1:20:

**God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made (Romans 1:20).**

When we look closely at these chapters, we see that “what has been made” is more than just the natural order. Paul also had in mind what we learn about God from human culture, from human beings themselves, and even from our personal inner lives — our moral consciences, intuitions, premonitions and the like.

**I think general revelation is a really important theological concept, number one, because it's the one thing that cannot be denied. We all live in this world; Christian or not, we're all living in the world God created. Now whether or not a non-Christian acknowledges that is another story. But in creation, in what we say “general revelation,” what we see around us, we see a lot about who God is just by looking at the creation. We see that we have a powerful God in the fact that he has created planets and stars and the moon. We have a God that has an eye for beauty and that things that are of a beautiful nature matter to him. We see that in animals, in trees, in a sunset. We see the majesty of God in a lion. We see the character of who he is everywhere we look. Now, this can be very important, especially from an evangelistic point of view, because we need a starting point somewhere, and general revelation gives us that starting point. We know certain things about the world we live in and, therefore, the God who created that world by simply looking around us.**

— Rev. Ric Rodeheaver

Throughout the centuries, this positive perspective on general revelation has played a major role in the doctrine of God in the form of “natural theology.” Natural theology is the ongoing attempt to learn about God through general revelation. Followers of Christ have always recognized that we can learn a lot about God through natural theology. And with rare exceptions, formal theological reflections on the doctrine of God, in nearly every branch of the church, have included natural theology.

In fact, leading Scholastic theologians during the medieval period actually constructed a formal, threefold strategy for pursuing natural theology. First, they spoke of “the way of causation” — *via causalitatis* in Latin. By this they meant that we can learn truths about God by observing the good things that God has created or “caused to be” in his creation. For instance, we can see that God created beauty and order in the world. So, we may conclude that God himself must be beautiful and orderly.



Second, Scholastics also spoke of “the way of negation” — *via negationis* in Latin. By this they meant that we can infer truths about God by contrasting him with the limitations and imperfections of creation. For instance, creation is limited by time, but God is eternal. Creation is limited by space, but God is infinite.

And third, medieval Scholastics also spoke of “the way of eminence” — *via eminentiae* in Latin. By this they meant that we can infer truths about God from general revelation by noting how God is always greater than the good things he has created. For example, the power of nature leads us to believe in the supreme power of God. Human intellectual abilities point us toward the incomparable wisdom of God.

For the most part, evangelicals today don’t follow such rigorous methods, but natural theology continues to play a major role in theology proper. Jesus taught his followers that God designed every dimension of our experience of creation to reveal things about himself. And, as Christ’s faithful people, we should be eager to search out everything we can learn about God through general revelation.

These positive outlooks on general revelation and natural theology are important to any study of theology proper. But, we must also take into account how the first two chapters of Romans present some crucial negative outlooks as well. In Romans 1:18, Paul emphasized the more negative outlooks on general revelation when he wrote:

**The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness (Romans 1:18).**

In this verse, Paul explained that general revelation reveals “the wrath of God” rather than the way of his mercy and salvation. And this is true because, more often than not, sinful people “suppress the truth” of general revelation “by their wickedness.” In fact, according to Romans 1:25:

**[Sinners have] exchanged the truth of God for a lie (Romans 1:25).**

Jesus himself indicated time and again that sinful human beings frequently fail to learn what they should about God from their experiences of life. As Jesus and Paul both conveyed, sinful people have a propensity to lie to themselves and to others about what God has revealed through his creation.

**I would want to be very careful about what we can learn about God through the label or through the category of natural theology. I would want to hang my hat upon a statement like Romans 1:20 that does talk about his majesty, his power. I think those are things you can hang your hat on in terms of what you can learn. But I would want to say immediately that we are in desperate need of special revelation to have a proper perspective... Therefore, you’re in need of special revelation to check human reasoning — autonomous or, I should say, independent human reasoning. Because the created realm yields some things that can also be read and understood problematically. Special revelation of the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ fills in accurately**

who God is. Consultation with his Word just to keep our reasoning in line — desperately needed.

— Dr. Bruce L. Fields

God's creation teaches us a number of things... Most basically, of course, it teaches us that he is the sovereign Creator. God is the one who brings all things into being out of nothing, therefore it teaches us also about his power. It also, according to Romans 1, teaches us about his righteousness. We hear in Romans 1 that all human beings know that there's a God, that he is to be worshiped, and all have a sense of the righteousness and holiness of God. What we do as sinful human beings is suppress that; we attempt to ignore it. So, creation teaches us God is Creator; he's powerful and he's righteous. We, as sinful human beings, attempt to deny and suppress those things. What creation does not teach us about God, therefore, is how to get right with him. Creation teaches us the things that I've outlined, but it doesn't teach us about God's grace and mercy in the Lord Jesus Christ. There has to be a supplemental revelation of that in his actions in the Lord Jesus Christ.

— Dr. Carl R. Trueman

These negative outlooks on general revelation raise a necessary word of caution about relying too heavily on natural theology. Natural theology is not infallible because sin has corrupted our ability to learn about God from our experiences of his creation. Despite the best efforts of sincere Christian theologians, natural theology has frequently misconstrued general revelation and introduced falsehoods into our concept of God.

For instance, during the patristic and medieval periods, pagan Hellenistic mysticism led many to deny that human beings can know anything about God himself. In the eighteenth century, misunderstandings of the order of nature led a number of theologians to endorse Enlightenment deism — the belief that God is uninvolved in the affairs of the world. In recent centuries, scientific studies in biology have led people to deny the biblical portrait of God as the Creator. At every turn, the corruption of the human heart has led theologians to miss the truth about God disclosed in general revelation.

Of course, these negative outlooks on natural theology lead to a fundamental question: If sin corrupts our awareness of general revelation, how can we know the truth about God?

To answer this question, we'll look at the second main type of divine revelation. In addition to general revelation, Jesus also taught that God has given us special or specific revelation.

***Special Revelation.*** Broadly speaking, special revelation is God's self-disclosure through supernatural means. The Holy Spirit has given revelation through dreams,

visions, auditions, and through his great acts of salvation and judgment. God has also made himself known through inspired human representatives — his prophets and apostles who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. And of course, as we said earlier, God’s greatest special revelation was in Christ.

The significance of special revelation for the doctrine of God hardly can be overstated. It’s so essential to God’s purposes that even before sin came into the world, God guided Adam and Eve through special verbal revelation. And, of course, special revelation has been critical after sin as well. It not only guides our attempts to understand general revelation, it also discloses the way of eternal salvation.

As wonderful as it is that God has granted supernatural revelation — both before and after sin came into the world — what we commonly call “special revelation from God” took place thousands of years ago. So, how do we learn about God through special revelation today?

Once again, we must turn to what Jesus, God’s supreme revelation, taught. In brief, Christ taught his followers to devote themselves to God’s special revelation in Scripture. Passages like Mark 12:28-34 clearly convey that Jesus, like other Palestinian rabbis in his day, affirmed the Old Testament as God’s special written revelation.

And we know that the New Testament is also God’s inspired revelation. In places like John 16:12-13, and Ephesians 2:20, we learn that, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to equip his first-century apostles and prophets to reveal God to his church. The New Testament is our representative collection of these first-century apostolic and prophetic special revelations. This is why evangelical Christians insist that we can rely on Scripture to discern God’s disclosures in both general revelation and special revelation throughout history.

In our study of God’s revelation and mysteries, we’ve explored divine revelation as the source of everything we know about God. Now, let’s turn to the other side of the equation. How should divine mysteries — the many things about God that remain hidden — impact our study of theology proper?

## **DIVINE MYSTERIES**

**One thing we have to get a handle on, that is not easy to get a handle on, and that is, who God really is. He is transcendent; he’s beyond the creation. All that we experience here in this world, he created, so we can’t really know him unless he reveals himself, unless he enters into creation somehow. He speaks to us; he reveals himself to us, which he has done fully in his Son Jesus. But that causes him to be mysterious to us. And in fact, the only way we can know the kingdom of God, his reign and his rule — because he allows us to live here, and he is an invisible God — so the only way we can know his kingdom is if he reveals that to us.**

**— Dr. Rick Boyd**

As we've seen, God has overcome the vast distance between himself and humanity. He's made it possible for us to know about him through his general and special revelation. But at the same time, our knowledge of God is deeply affected by divine mysteries. There are many things that God has not revealed about himself.

Understanding divine mysteries is so crucial to theology proper that it will help to look at it in two steps. We'll first explain the basic concept of divine mysteries. Then, we'll touch on the types of mysteries we face as we study the doctrine of God. What is the basic concept of divine mysteries?

## Basic Concept

The term "mystery" is used in a variety of ways in Scripture, but for our purposes, we may say that divine mysteries are:

**Innumerable, undisclosed truths about God that limit our understanding of God.**

We'll highlight two facets of this definition. The first facet is the fact that divine mysteries are "innumerable, undisclosed truths about God." In Romans 11:33, the apostle Paul pointed out that we should always be mindful of divine mysteries. He wrote:

**Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!  
(Romans 11:33).**

In the chapters leading up to this verse, Paul drew many firm beliefs about God from both general and special revelation. But, in this passage, Paul pointed out the "depth" of God's wisdom and knowledge. And he accepted that God's judgments are "unsearchable" and "his paths beyond tracing out." Even though Paul grasped much about God through divine revelation, he still faced countless mysteries, things that the Spirit of God had not revealed.

**God is mysterious because he surpasses any comprehension or knowledge that we may have. He acts at times without consulting us. He always acts without consulting us, but sometimes the way he acts is difficult for us to discern. He's also incomprehensible in the sense that no one can totally exhaust the knowledge of God. There is bound to be mystery because he is God and not a creature... There's nothing about God's mysteriousness that is a problem for us in any ultimate way. The mystery of God does not mean he can't be accessed. It doesn't mean he doesn't love us and that we can't feel his love. It doesn't mean any of those things. In fact, if he weren't mysterious, we could safely say he wouldn't be God; why would we want a God who isn't mysterious... We know him, not exhaustively, but we know him**

**truly. We don't comprehend him, but we know him surely enough to say that we know God and not just some vague philosophical principle.**

**— Dr. William Edgar**

Charles Hodge, professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, who lived from 1797-1878, summed up divine mysteries in a remarkable way. In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Part I, chapter 4, he wrote this:

**There is infinitely more in God than we have any idea of; and what we do know, we know imperfectly.**

Hodge made two striking observations here. First, he insisted that what is true of God is “infinitely more ... than we have any idea of.” There are not just a handful of mysteries, nor even a lot of mysteries. Rather, because God himself is infinite, there are infinitely more mysteries than we can even imagine. Hodge also explained that divine mysteries so permeate our understanding that even “what we do know [about God], we know imperfectly.” In other words, there's not a single thing about God that we understand fully.

**Sometimes when we hear someone say that God is incomprehensible, we sort of react negatively to that — well, can't I know him? Can't I come to know him? And of course, the Bible is God's self-revelation. He has revealed himself so that we can come to know him in a personal way and that we can come to know something about him. But if you stop and think about it, if God is truly the infinite God, then my poor little mind, and even the best theological minds that have ever lived, will not be able to comprehend him in his fullness. By definition, if I could comprehend him, I would be as great as he is. And so this is a very important part of... Our God is not a little God. He is not small enough that I can get all of him into my mind or into a book. We are grateful that he has revealed enough of himself and that he has provided for our salvation that we can come to have some understanding of him, and can come into fellowship with him, to live rightly in fellowship with him, and to think rightly about him, though not exhaustively.**

**— Dr. Gareth Cockerill**

In addition to recognizing that divine mysteries are innumerable, we should also note a second important facet of divine mysteries. Divine mysteries severely limit our understanding as we study theology proper.

There are many different ways that divine mysteries limit what we know about God, but for this lesson, we'll consider just two ways. On the one side, we have severely limited information about God. Although God has made clear what is essential for salvation and life in Christ, in reality, none of us understands much about God. First

Corinthians 13:12 tells us that we see only a “poor reflection” of the truth of God, as if we’re looking “in a mirror.”

So, in discussions of the doctrine of God, countless questions come up that simply can’t be answered fully. For instance, why does God allow evil? How can we discern God’s purposes in current events? Many theologians, especially those surrounded by skeptics, stray into speculation because they can’t admit that we don’t have every answer to these kinds of questions. But divine mysteries often lead Christ’s faithful followers to admit, “I don’t know.” When it comes to the doctrine of God, if God hasn’t revealed it, we can’t know it. It’s as simple as that.

As faithful followers of Christ, we should never run from the fact that we have limited information about God. In fact, it’s a blessing to be reminded moment by moment of this limitation. Divine mysteries compel us to trust God. We must depend on the Father and on Christ, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, rather than placing our faith in our own limited abilities to possess knowledge of God.

On the other side, divine mysteries also mean that human beings are only able to offer limited explanations of God’s revelations. We’re right to insist that the revelation of the God of truth doesn’t contradict itself. And that there are many logical connections we can see among the revelations of God. But whether we admit it or not, divine mysteries not only limit how much information we have about God. They also limit our ability to explain the logical coherence of much of what God has revealed about himself.

For instance, we can’t give a thoroughly logical explanation of the Trinity — the fact that God is one and three. We can’t logically explain every dimension of the reality that Jesus is both truly God and truly man. We can’t fully clarify how God can be entirely sovereign over human affairs and still hold us responsible for what we do. The best Christian minds have tried to answer these and many similar questions. But, they’ve been unable to provide anything close to complete and logical explanations.

In the end, it can be valuable to attempt to explain the logical coherence of what God has revealed about himself. But this isn’t how we determine whether something is true or false. The truth of any theological claim depends only on whether or not God has disclosed it in general or special revelation.

**When theologians state that God is incomprehensible, what they are intimating or meaning is that his full essence and being cannot be grasped and understood by us who are a finite being. God, being an infinite being in that regard there, it is very unlikely that we can grasp and know him in his fullness. I think back to what Paul says in Romans 11:33-34 when he is talking about the unsearchable knowledge and wisdom of God in that respect there. But yet and still, though he has provided us with enough self-revelation, that it is adequate for us, you know, to come to faith.**

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

To understand the significance of divine mysteries more fully, we’ve explored the basic concept. Now, it will also help to consider the types of divine mysteries that come into play as we study the doctrine of God.

## Types

We can distinguish between two different types of mysteries. The first type we'll call "temporary mysteries." Let's look at what we mean by this.

**Temporary.** Temporary mysteries are truths about God that are hidden from human beings for a period of time, but then are revealed at some later point in history. God often discloses what was once mysterious through general revelation. He uses the physical world, human cultures, other people, or even changes within ourselves to reveal temporary mysteries.

Something similar is true with special revelation. A careful reading of Scripture shows that God's later special revelations have never contradicted his earlier special revelations. But it's also clear that God has disclosed more and more about himself over time. This unfolding of special revelation occurred at every period of biblical history. Of course, the most dramatic unveiling of divine mysteries took place in the special revelation of Christ. Paul had this in mind when he wrote Ephesians 1:9, 3:3, and 6:19. In these verses, Paul referred to the mystery of God's eternal purpose in Christ. He explained that this mystery had been kept hidden until the time of the New Testament apostles and prophets.

For this reason, whenever we seek to learn about God, we must always search out special revelation in the New Testament to clarify temporary mysteries found in the Old Testament.

**Sometimes we use the term "mysterious" to speak about God because we don't understand exactly what he's doing. The New Testament, on the other hand, generally uses the term "mysterious," which comes from the Greek word *mysterion* — it's virtually the same word — it means that God's unfolding gracious plan of salvation is something that we would never have figured out on our own. That is, it's a mystery in the sense that we would never have understood it had it not been for the fact that God revealed it to us. And so, God reveals his plan to us in his special revelation. And that's the reason that you see that word *mysterion* used in Ephesians and used in 1 Corinthians. It's that God is slowly ... unfolding his revelation and showing us how salvation is both for the Jew and the Gentile, and it is for anyone who will accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah.**

**— Dr. Samuel Lamerson**

But we must also remember that, even as New Testament Christians, God hasn't revealed every temporary mystery to us just yet. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul put it this way:

**Now I know in part; then I shall know fully (1 Corinthians 13:12).**

Only when Christ returns in glory will he disclose every temporary mystery. And we will understand God and his ways far more fully than we do today.

As we've seen, when we study the doctrine of God we face many temporary mysteries. But the Bible makes it clear that we also have to deal with permanent mysteries as we study theology proper.

***Permanent.*** Permanent mysteries are truths about God that human beings will never grasp because these truths are beyond our comprehension. In traditional theology, this reality is deemed the incomprehensibility of God. We can understand some things about God as he reveals them in human terms, but we'll never understand everything about anything about God. We find this idea expressed clearly in Isaiah 55:8-9, where the prophet Isaiah wrote this:

**“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).**

In these verses, Isaiah reminded Israel of God's permanent mysteries due to God's incomprehensibility.

**When the Scriptures refer to God as mysterious, we have to make sure that we don't misunderstand the word “mystery.” When I think of things in this world as mysterious I think that they have some dark secret that they're going to surprise me with at some point. That's not the case here. By "mysterious" we mean that God is incomprehensible. We mean that he has a life that is beyond our imagining. It means that there is something about him that we cannot grasp entirely. And I quite like that. That means that he is beyond my creaturely life. He's greater than I could ever think. The technical theological word we use for this is “transcendence.” God is transcendent. He is beyond our scope of thinking. And that is why he is worthy of worship. That is why he is great. That is why he is someone we adore.**

**— Dr. Gary M. Burge**

**Mystery in God is partly due to the nature of who he is and his infinitude versus our finitude, our limitation, and his unlimited power and understanding. But also, it's related specifically to his purposes and plans in creation. Why does God work out his ways in this way and not that? And oftentimes, I think, as arrogant human beings, we would like to think that we know better how to work things out than God does. But in the mystery of God... It talks about it in Scripture,**



for example, that the hidden things are God's alone, in Deuteronomy 29:29, but the things that he's revealed, those are the things that we can rejoice and celebrate in, and there's a sense in which we can accept that God hasn't told us everything, hasn't told us everything about himself — how could he? And how could we comprehend it? But also, he hasn't told us everything about how he's working out his purposes and plans. And nobody knows that better than Job in the Old Testament who wanted an answer to his questions about why did God allow these things, and God basically didn't give him the answer he wanted. The answer God gave was, "I know what I'm doing, and in a sense there is a mystery to my plan that only I can fully explain, and ultimately you will see at the end of time when everything will suddenly and completely make sense."

— Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

As we begin this series on what we know about God, we must always remember that, while God has revealed himself in both general and special revelation, he has kept both temporary and permanent mysteries hidden from us. We simply cannot escape the reality that we are but creatures whose understanding of God is always severely limited.

So far in this lesson on what we know about God we've looked at some of the ways divine revelation and mysteries shape the study of theology proper. Now, we're ready to introduce our second main topic: God's attributes and works. These subjects represent two of the primary ways traditional theologians have summarized what we can know about God.

---

## ATTRIBUTES & WORKS

---

In addition to God's attributes and works, systematic theologians have usually given a lot of attention to the doctrine of the Trinity in theology proper. We deal with the Holy Trinity in some detail in our series on The Apostles' Creed. So, in this series we'll focus just on these other two main topics.

In later lessons, we'll explore many features of the attributes and works of God, but at this point we'll just introduce each concept. First, we'll consider divine attributes, or who God is. And second, we'll turn to divine works, or what God does. Let's begin with God's divine attributes.

### DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

It will help to introduce the topic of divine attributes in two steps. We'll begin with the basic concept of God's attributes. Then we'll examine the types of divine attributes that are often distinguished in systematic theology. So, what is the basic concept of divine attributes?

## Basic Concept

If we were to ask most Christians, “What are the attributes of God?” they would probably say that God’s attributes are all the qualities or characteristics that the Scriptures attribute to God. Well, this outlook is fine as far as it goes. But in traditional systematic theology the phrase “attributes of God” signifies something more specific. In systematic theology, divine attributes are:

**The perfections of God’s essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.**

This definition highlights two primary factors that characterize formal discussions of God’s attributes. In the first place, God’s attributes are “the perfections of God’s essence.” Modern evangelicals don’t often refer to God’s essence. So, it will help to explore this concept a bit.

To begin with, the word “essence” translates the Latin term *essentia*, meaning “essence” or “being.” In Latin theology, God’s essence was also closely associated with the term *substantia* or “substance.” Patristic and medieval theologians adopted these terms from neo-Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. Now, Plato and Aristotle approached the idea of essence in different ways. And there are a number of important complexities about the concept of essence that have been raised in modern philosophy. But the basic idea isn’t difficult to grasp.

In simple terms, the “essence,” “being,” or “substance” of something is the unchanging reality that underlies all of its outward, changing manifestations. Christian theologians have drawn upon this idea of essence as they’ve discussed the attributes or perfections of God.

In general, God’s essence involves four important distinctions: God’s essence, what God is in himself; God’s perfections or attributes, the qualities of God’s essence; God’s long-term historical manifestations, his disclosures of himself over long periods of time; and God’s short-term historical manifestations, his disclosures of himself in relatively short periods of time.

To clarify what we mean here, let’s think about these distinctions using the example of a person. We’ll say that this particular person is a soloist in church on Sundays. He’s a farmer who milks cows twice a day on his farm. He’s also a husband and a grandfather. And of course, as Christians, we know that he’s the image of God, ordained as God’s representative and God’s servant.

Some facts we know about this man refer to short-term historical manifestations of who he is. These things are true of him only now and then. He’s a soloist in church, but only on Sundays. He milks cows, but only twice a day. While these descriptions are true of him, they don’t refer to his essence. Rather, he remains the same man when he involves himself in these activities and when he doesn’t.

Some of these descriptions refer to relatively long-term historical manifestations of who this man is. He’s a husband and a grandfather. These descriptions apply for longer

periods of time, but they are not essential to who the man is. He wasn't always a husband or a grandfather. But he was always the same man.

When we speak of this man as the image of God, ordained to be God's representative and God's servant, we are speaking of permanent attributes of his essence, qualities of his humanity. No matter what happens in his life, these descriptions are true of him.

But if we were to add up all that we know about him, including his permanent attributes, we realize that we only have glimpses into his essence. The essence of who this man is remains somewhat elusive, always beyond our full grasp.

In many ways, systematic theologians make similar distinctions in theology proper. Now, as we all know, the Scriptures forbid making images of God. So, we won't attempt to portray God himself here. But to help us understand God's essence we'll use an analogy. Try to imagine a mysterious, nebula in outer space as representing the essence of God. Surrounding this nebula are stained-glass windows that represent the attributes or perfections of God's essence. Beyond this, imagine systems of stars and planets extending from this centerpiece that represent the long-term manifestations of God. And finally, imagine more distant systems of stars and planets that represent God's short-term manifestations. These distinctions between God's essence, his attributes and his long and short-term manifestations in history are crucial in discussions of the doctrine of God in traditional systematic theology.

Listen to the first Article of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*, written in 1530 that resembles discussions of God's essence in the Anglican *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* and the Methodist *Twenty-Five Articles of Religion*:

**There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible.**

As we see here, the Confession explicitly refers to the "one Divine Essence." In effect, the essence of God is the unchanging reality that underlies the variety of ways God has manifested himself in the course of history.

Unfortunately, before the Reformation, many theologians that were inclined toward Christian mysticism followed Hellenistic philosophies and concluded that God's essence is shrouded in mystery. In this view, God's revelations tell us little, if anything, about his eternal essence. They only tell us about his secondary, changing, historical manifestations. Now, evangelicals agree that there is infinitely more to God's essence than we can know. But, despite this, evangelicals still insist that God has actually revealed some of the attributes, or the qualities, of his divine essence. This belief clearly follows the teachings of Scripture.

Look again at the first article of the *Augsburg Confession*. Immediately after mentioning the "one Divine Essence," the Confession turns to a number of qualities or properties of God's essence. God is "eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness." These attributes of God — these eternal, unchanging qualities — characterize God's essence.

On occasion, biblical authors referred explicitly to God's eternal, essential perfections. For instance, Psalm 34:8 declares that "the Lord is good." Paul wrote in 1

Timothy 1:17 that God is “eternal.” When we study all of Scripture, it’s clear that no matter what God says or does in any situation, no matter what variety he displays, he is always good and he is always eternal. The same kind of thing can be said regarding what the Scriptures teach about God’s infinity, his holiness, his justice, his wisdom, his incomprehensibility, his omnipotence and a number of other divine attributes. They are all permanent qualities of his divine essence that the Scriptures refer to explicitly.

**An attribute of God is that which is innate to God himself. It is that which makes God, God. You call it his nature, his substance. It is that reality in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit all completely share. And so, it’s that which distinguishes God, in many respects, from what we are as finite creatures. And so, yeah, it is what defines the “Godness” of God.**

— Dr. J. Scott Horrell

But now let’s take another look at our definition of divine attributes. In addition to being the perfections of God’s essence, divine attributes are also revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.

As we’ve just said, the Scriptures occasionally refer rather directly to God’s eternal attributes. But, for the most part, they display God’s attributes indirectly through descriptions, names and titles, metaphors and similes, and reports of his actions in history. None of these manifestations are contrary to his essence — God always manifests himself in ways that are true to who he is — but, in systematic theology, the attributes of God are not the same as his manifestations. Instead, we determine the attributes of God by asking: “What must always have been true of God, and what must always be true of God that explains all the ways he has manifested himself in history?”

Now, we have to be careful here. It usually isn’t difficult to maintain this distinction between God’s attributes and his manifestations when we deal with things that were true of God for relatively short periods of time. For instance, in Ezekiel 8:18, God said that he would not listen to the prayers of his people. But clearly, we shouldn’t say that it’s God’s essence to refuse to listen to prayers. In many other places, the Scriptures tell us that God does listen to prayers. Both of these descriptions of God are true historical manifestations of who he is at particular times. But neither is a quality of his essence. Instead, God’s attributes are the eternal perfections of his essence that are true of him both when he listens and when he does not listen to prayers.

Now, by contrast, it’s often more difficult to distinguish between God’s attributes and his historical manifestations when they last for relatively long periods of time. For example, we may be tempted to think that patience is an attribute of God because he has shown patience toward sinners generation after generation. But, as we know from the Bible, God’s patience ends with different people at different times in history. And it will end for all sinners at the final judgment when Christ returns in glory. So, in the technical sense of systematic theology, even something as long-lasting as divine patience is not an eternal attribute of God’s essence.

We’ll explore this distinction in more detail in later lessons. But at this point, the basic idea should be clear. God manifests himself short-term and long-term in certain

ways in history. But, the attributes of God are those qualities of God that have been true of him forever, and that will always be true of him forever.

Keeping divine attributes and this basic concept in mind, we should turn to a second issue: the different types of God's attributes. How have theologians identified and classified the perfections of God's essence?

## Types

Because the Bible doesn't explicitly identify all of God's attributes, and because it doesn't classify them for us, theologians have grouped God's perfections in different ways. Many scholars have classified God's attributes along the lines we mentioned earlier in this lesson: "the way of causation," "the way of negation," and "the way of eminence." Another common way of classifying God's attributes is based on current understandings of human beings as the image of God. In this approach, it's common to speak of God's perfections as his "being," his "intellect," his "will" and his "moral character." Now, neither of these systems of classification have been the most prominent. But we need to keep them in mind because they appear time and again, either explicitly or implicitly, as theologians discuss the attributes of God.

For the most part, evangelicals have favored dividing God's perfections into two main types of attributes. The first type is called God's incommunicable attributes. And the second type is referred to as his communicable attributes. Let's unpack what we mean by both of these categories, beginning with the incommunicable attributes of God.

**Incommunicable.** Well-known theologians have often pointed out the limitations of this twofold classification, and we'll look into some of these issues in lessons that follow. But this distinction continues to be a common way of speaking of the perfections of God's essence.

The term "incommunicable" means "unable to be shared." So, God's incommunicable attributes are those perfections of his essence that creation — including human beings as the image of God — cannot share with him. As such, incommunicable attributes roughly correspond to the perfections of God that we determine through the "way of negation." These attributes focus on how God is different from his creation.

As we saw a moment ago, the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* refers to six attributes of God. He is eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness. Although it's something of an oversimplification, it's common for the incommunicable attributes of God to be associated with the terms eternal, without body, without parts, and infinite. God is eternal; we are temporal. He is without body; we are bodies. He is without parts; we are divided into parts. He is infinite; we are finite.

Now, for God to communicate with us in human terms, the Scriptures occasionally draw upon faint, positive comparisons between these attributes and creation. Yet, without a doubt, the primary way the Bible explains these attributes of God is through contrast between what God is and what his creation is. As a result, the Scriptures don't call on human beings to imitate God in these ways. We aren't instructed to try to be eternal, without bodies, without parts, or infinite. On the contrary, the Scriptures call on

us to acknowledge these attributes of God in humble worship and praise for how he is so different from us.

With this idea of the incommunicable attributes of God in mind, let's consider the second type of God's attributes: God's communicable attributes.

**Communicable.** Of the attributes listed in the first article of the *Augsburg Confession*, the communicable attributes are usually associated with power, wisdom, and goodness.

The term “communicable” signifies that something is able to be shared. In this case, we refer to the fact that some of God's eternal perfections are shared with his creation, especially with human beings as the image of God. Human beings have power, wisdom and goodness — imperfectly and on a human scale — but we possess these qualities nonetheless.

The primary way that we understand God's communicable attributes is by comparison. In this sense, the communicable attributes roughly correspond to those that medieval scholastic theologians identified through “the way of causation” and “the way of eminence.” Throughout Scripture, we're often commanded not simply to admire these divine attributes, but also to imitate them. We're to be more and more like God in our exercise of power. And we're to imitate him by developing and displaying wisdom and goodness in our lives.

There are many things that need to be said about both of these classes of God's perfections. And we'll explore more about their significance in later lessons of this series. But at this point, we should simply keep in mind that one of the most common ways to distinguish God's perfections from each other is to speak of them as his incommunicable and communicable attributes.

**It's important for students who are trying to study systematic theology to kind of understand the difference between the communicable and incommunicable attributes of God, because we've got to understand what makes us different. Right? God is wholly other, distinct from his creation, yet we are created in the image of God. So, it's important for us to understand what things we are like God being his imagers, and what things that we are not. And so it's important to always keep in mind that God is infinite and eternal and unchangeable in all that he is, and although we are finite and changeable and mutable in all those different ways, and the failures, we still have certain aspects of our being that are like God when it comes to things like we can have knowledge, we can love, we can seek justice and mercy. Those are things that God does perfectly — we do in a finite level — but it's important for us to understand who we are as his imagers and who he is as our Creator.**

— Prof. Brandon P. Robbins

So far, we've introduced the concept of the attributes and works of God by looking at his divine attributes. Now, let's turn to the other side of this pair, God's divine works.

## DIVINE WORKS

We'll only touch briefly on divine works in this lesson because we'll explore this idea more thoroughly toward the end of this series. But as an overview, we'll explain first the basic concept of divine works; and second, we'll introduce the types of God's works. Consider first the basic concept of divine works.

### Basic Concept

If we were to ask most evangelicals, "What are the works of God?" most of us would simply point to those places where the Scriptures say that God did this or that. And that would be right, as far as it goes. But systematic theologians approach divine works much like they approach divine attributes. Instead of focusing on specific historical events, they seek to understand what lies behind these events. They ask, "What can we know that is always true of what God has done, is doing, and will do?"

We can summarize this basic approach to divine works by saying that, in systematic theology, the topic of divine works refers to:

**How God works all things according to his eternal purposes.**

We'll highlight two facets of this topic, beginning with the fact that divine works entail all things. The idea that divine works include every event often seems a bit theoretical and speculative for new students of theology. So, we should say a few words about this dimension of the works of God. In Ephesians 1:11, Paul praised God as:

**Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).**

Here we see that Paul mentioned the fact that God "works out everything." He didn't say that God is involved with some events, or even with many events. He had in mind that, in some sense, God works out every single event that ever has occurred and ever will occur.

It's unusual for modern evangelicals to think about God's works on such a large scale. For many of us, we read the Scriptures and conclude that God only does some things, while other parts of creation do other things.

Now, these kinds of differentiations do appear in Scripture. The Bible speaks of God acting directly in the world at times. For example, he delivered Israel at the sea. And the Scriptures also refer to preternatural creatures causing events to occur, such as when Satan tempted Job to curse God. Beyond this, we read about human beings causing things to happen. For instance, David worked hard preparing for Solomon's temple. We read of animals and plants having effects on the world. And the Bible also talks of inanimate objects, like the sun, influencing life on the earth.

But the question in traditional Christian theology is this: Should we limit what we call “God’s works” simply to those events that Scripture attributes exclusively to God? Following the Scriptures, the mainstream of traditional Christian theology has responded to this question with a resounding, “No.” Drawing terminology from Aristotle, Christian theologians have described God as the “First Cause” of all things. In evangelical theology, this means that God, as the First Cause, did not simply begin history. Rather, God is the ultimate cause behind every event that occurs at every moment in history.

But in addition to designating God as the First Cause, evangelical systematic theologians have also spoken of second causes. Second causes are created beings or objects that perform real, but secondary roles in causing events to occur.

This distinction between the First Cause and second causes is based on the fact that the Scriptures treat more than just a handful of spectacular, miraculous events — like the deliverance of Israel at the sea — as divine works. The first chapter of Job makes it clear that God commissioned Satan to test Job. In 1 Chronicles 29:16 David himself gave God the glory for his success in preparing for Solomon’s temple. Passages like Psalm 147:7-9 indicate that God is in control of what animals and plants do. And the effects of inanimate objects, like the sun, are attributed to God in passages like Isaiah 45:6-7.

Later in this series, we’ll explore how God, the First Cause, employs creation, or second causes, in a variety of ways. And we’ll see especially how this helps us understand that God is not the author of evil. But for now, we simply want to point out that, in one way or another, God’s works include everything that occurs in history, whether he does them directly or indirectly. If we look again at our summary of the basic concept of divine works, we can see that divine works are also “according to [God’s] eternal purposes.”

As we saw earlier in this lesson, theologians have given a lot of attention to God’s eternal, unchanging attributes in theology proper. In a similar way, they’ve also concentrated on how God’s works are according to his eternal, unchanging plan or purposes. Now, it’s fair to say that many modern evangelicals are unfamiliar with this concept. And those who speak of such matters have different ways of understanding them. So, we should take a moment to explain the basic idea that we have in mind. You’ll recall that, in Ephesians 1:11, Paul praised God as:

**Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).**

Notice here that Paul not only spoke of “everything” as the work of God, but also that every work of God is “in conformity with the purpose of his will.” Here Paul referred to the Old Testament concept that God has an eternal plan for history, a plan that he is sure to fulfill. Listen, for instance, to Isaiah 46:10 where God said this:

**I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please (Isaiah 46:10).**

Now, this facet of God’s works is so mysterious that faithful Christians have understood it in many different ways. But on the whole, mainstream Christian theology



has always affirmed that God has an eternal plan. And his works — that include every dimension of history — always fulfill his eternal purposes. God is not ignorant of what will happen in history. He is never surprised by history. His purposes are not frustrated. As mysterious as it is, nothing is beyond God’s all-encompassing plan for history in Christ.

**Whenever something happens in the world, people wonder, “Is this something that God really had in mind or not?” and particularly when things go wrong in the world we wonder, “Where is God in this, and what is his purpose?” And I think it’s helpful for us to understand the fullness of the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God, because it’s clear that there is nothing that happens that is outside the ultimate will and purpose of God. And there are lots of places we can point to in Scripture. Ephesians 1 is certainly, is one of those places, which, it says that God works out everything according to the purpose of his will. And so everything that has ever happened in history is ultimately part of the purposes of God... And God has — and this is a great mystery for us with our limited minds — God has a purpose that he’s working out through human history.**

— Dr. Philip Ryken

**If God is omniscient, if God's knowledge is comprehensive of the past, present and future, all things possible and all things actual, then all historical events are part of his plan.**

— Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

Having touched on the basic concept of divine works, we should also mention how formal discussions of the doctrine of God have distinguished different types, or kinds of divine works.

## **Types**

As just one example, listen once again to the first article of the *Augsburg Confession*:

**There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible.**

As we see here, after listing a number of God’s attributes, the Confession draws attention to two types of divine works. On the one side, it mentions that God is “the

Maker ... of all things, visible and invisible.” And on the other side, it mentions that God is the “Preserver of all things, visible and invisible.”

These affirmations in the Augsburg Confession represent a prominent, traditional distinction between two types of divine works. The first is God’s work of creation. We all know that, in Genesis 1:1, the Bible begins in this way:

**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).**

In many respects, the Scriptures begin with this teaching because it forms the basis of everything we believe about the works of God.

There are many ways to summarize traditional treatments of God’s work of creation in theology proper. And we’ll explore these matters in later lessons. But, in this lesson, it will suffice simply to mention three main emphases. First, the fact of creation: how God created everything that exists. Second, the variety of creation: how God created variety both in the physical and spiritual realms. And third, the purpose of creation: how God first established the creation to fulfill his eternal purposes.

In addition to the work of creation, the second type of divine works is God’s work of providence, or as it is often put, the fact that God preserves his creation.

Unfortunately, all too often, evangelical Christians today don’t grasp how profound God’s work of providence is. They imagine that when God created the world, he gave it a measure of independence so that it can hold together without his attention. But in traditional systematic theology, the term “providence” — from the Latin term "*providentia*" — has connotations of “attending to something, or taking care of something.” And this terminology reflects the Christian belief that creation is just as dependent on God now as it was at the very first moment of creation. Listen to Colossians 1:16-17 where the apostle Paul said these words:

**For in [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).**

As this passage indicates, not only is it true that in Christ all things were created, it’s equally true that in him all things hold together. By drawing this parallel, the apostle made it clear that creation would simply fall apart if it weren’t for God’s providence — his preserving and sustaining care — constantly at work in creation.

Simply put, much like the work of creation, the work of providence can be summarized in three main ways: the fact of God’s providential care for creation, how he preserves and sustains the world and everything he has made; the variety of God’s providential care, how he interacts with different facets of creation in different ways; and the purpose of God’s providential care, how God ensures that creation will fulfill his eternal purposes. We won’t explore these details in this lesson. But, as we continue to study the doctrine of God, we’ll see more clearly how crucial it is to understand the works of God, both his work of creation and his work of providence.

Well, when we're talking about the providence of God, what we're talking about is God's ongoing care for his creation and all his creatures. We don't just believe that God created the world and kind of wandered off to do something else. No, God continues to sustain the world by his word of power. Through his word, through his Spirit, God continues to sustain the world. So we think about God providing what we need: food, water, air, all those things we take for granted, God's providing them. It's why it's important we say our thanks to God. We say grace at meals and offer him praise and thanksgiving. Every good gift we got from the Father above. So, we need to remember he gives us everything we need. He is the governor. He's actually overseeing all events, even historical events sometimes that seem wild out of control, but God is omnipotent above all these things, guiding them, allowing things to happen that we may be mystified by, but we believe God is still in charge and guiding them to his own outcome. But also, particularly providing for us and for our salvation, helping us to realize our need for his gracious restorative work, our rebuilding work, and that he will one day take us to that new heavens and the new earth if we put our faith in him... We follow him to this new kingdom. What we're going to see there is the fullness of God's providential care when he does, as the great heavenly Father who loves us so much, provides us every good gift that we need to sustain us in the work he's given us to do.

— Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

---

## CONCLUSION

---

In this lesson, we've introduced our study of the doctrine of God, or theology proper, by focusing on how we can grow in what we know about God. We've seen how our knowledge of God is shaped by both divine revelation and mysteries, including special and general revelation and temporary and permanent mysteries. And we've learned that our knowledge of God entails an awareness of both his attributes and his works, both his incommunicable and communicable attributes, and his works of creation and providence.

All followers of Christ should be eager to grow in their personal knowledge of God and in their experience of his actions in the world. But to do this, we must also devote ourselves to learning as much as we possibly can about God. In this lesson, we've only touched on a few of the main issues that come to the foreground in theology proper. But as we continue in the lessons that follow, we'll learn more and more about the doctrine of God as we explore more about who God is and what he does. And as we do, we'll see every step of the way, how increasing our knowledge of God is essential to every dimension of Christian theology, and to every dimension of faithful service to God.

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams (Host)** is Associate Pastor at Grace and Peace Fellowship in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Williams earned his M.Div. at Chesapeake Theological Seminary and his D.Min. at Covenant Theological Seminary. Before joining Grace and Peace Fellowship, Dr. Williams was Senior Pastor of New Song Community Church in Baltimore, MD. He also served as Minister of Outreach and Youth at Faith Christian Fellowship Church and was Co-Area Director with Young Life.

---

**Dr. Rick Boyd** is Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

**Dr. Gary M. Burge** is Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College & Graduate School.

**Dr. Gareth Cockerill** is Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

**Rev. Larry Cockrell** is Senior Pastor of Household of Faith Church and faculty member of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Dr. William Edgar** is Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Bruce L. Fields** is Chair of the Biblical and Systematic Theology Department and Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. J. Scott Horrell** is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider** is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Samuel Lamerson** is President of Knox Theological Seminary and Professor of New Testament.

**Dr. Jeffery Moore** served at Trinity Downtown Orlando as Senior Pastor from 2003 to 2014.

**Prof. Brandon P. Robbins** is Staff Apologist at the Apologetics Resource Center for Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Ric Rodeheaver** is Senior Pastor of Christ Community Church in Laguna Hills, California.

**Dr. Philip Ryken** is President of Wheaton College.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry** is Dean and President of Trinity School for Ministry, as well as Professor of Systematic Theology.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes** is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University's Talbot School of Theology and is Chair of the Biblical and Theological Studies Theology Department.

**Dr. Carl R. Trueman** is Professor of Historical Theology and Church History and the Paul Woolley Chair of History at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler** is resident faculty member of Theological and Historical Studies at East Asia School of Theology.

# We Believe in God

LESSON  
ONE

## What We Know About God

Faculty Forum



Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, study guides and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### **ABOUT THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES**

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Third Millennium has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Third Millennium Ministries is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org)

# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b> What can we know about God from the Bible’s portrayal of him as King?.....	1
<b>Question 2:</b> How should Christians today respond to the kingship of God? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b> What are the main ways we can come to know God? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b> What does creation tell us about God? .....	5
<b>Question 5:</b> What are the benefits of general revelation for theology, and in particular, for the doctrine of God?.....	7
<b>Question 6:</b> What is natural theology? .....	8
<b>Question 7:</b> Can human beings be saved by general revelation alone?.....	9
<b>Question 8:</b> How important are the Scriptures in the life of the believer? .....	10
<b>Question 9:</b> Why does Scripture sometimes describe God as mysterious?.....	11
<b>Question 10:</b> What do theologians mean when they say that God is incomprehensible? .....	12
<b>Question 11:</b> Does the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility mean that we can’t really know God?.....	13
<b>Question 12:</b> What is the doctrine of the Trinity, and how should we distinguish between the persons of God and his essence? .....	15
<b>Question 13:</b> What is an attribute of God? .....	16



# We Believe in God

## Lesson One: What We Know About God

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia  
Dr. Gary H. Burge  
Dr. Gareth Cockerill  
Rev. Larry Cockrell  
Dr. Lynn Cohick  
Dr. Dorian Coover-Cox  
Dr. William Edgar  
Dr. Joseph D. Fantin  
Dr. Bruce L. Fields

Dr. Matt Friedeman  
Rev. Dan Hendley  
Dr. Joel C. Hunter  
Rev. Clete Hux  
Dr. Glenn R. Kreider  
Dr. Richard Lints  
Dr. R. Todd Mangum  
Dr. Jeffery Moore  
Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.

Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe  
Rev. Ric Rodeheaver  
Dr. Steven C. Roy  
Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry  
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes  
Dr. Simon Vibert  
Dr. Guy Waters  
Dr. Michael D. Williams  
Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

### Question 1:

**What can we know about God from the Bible's portrayal of him as King?**

#### **Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe**

The Bible often speaks of God as King, and it's... We know what a human king is like, and the Bible speaks of God, then, as a king who rules. A good example of this occurs in Exodus 15. This is the Song of Moses. To get the setting, God has just delivered Israel out of Egypt. They were slaves under Pharaoh and he has set them free from Egypt, and Moses sings this song dedicated to Yahweh, that because:

**[Yahweh] has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea (Exodus 15:1, ESV).**

And then at the end of the song, verse 18, it says,

**[Yahweh] will reign, forever and ever (Exodus 15:18, ESV).**

So the idea is that Yahweh has established that he is in charge, not Pharaoh; that he is the king, not Pharaoh; that Yahweh is ruling over the nations and over what happens and especially over his people, Israel, not Pharaoh. And so, Yahweh kind of asserts himself and asserts his rule, and in this case his rule is good news. It means salvation from bondage in Egypt. So, the rule of God in the Bible doesn't just mean that he's in charge, but very often it means that he rules to the benefit of his people... as opposed to some evil oppressor being in charge and ruling, so that Yahweh has won the victory and shown himself to be the King... He is a good king. He's a righteous king. He's a gracious king. So that's good news.

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum**

Well, there are a number of portrayals of God in an authoritative position throughout the Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, but New and Old. In an authoritative position, God can be portrayed as a parent, God can be portrayed as a shepherd. One of the most common, particularly in the Old Testament, is God being portrayed as a king. Now, in contemporary understanding, that can be confusing because a number of kings that we know of or think of are either really pompous or are some sort of despot. But in the ancient world, the common form of government would have been of a monarch, of a ruler with complete and absolute authority. God fits that. God fits that better than any human monarch because he really is in control, he really does have the authority to make commands and demands and issue decrees that we are — as his subjects, being his creatures — are obliged to obey. His commands are good, his commands benefit the subjects that are under that obligation, and thus it's appropriate to refer to God and portray God as a benevolent king.

**Dr. Dorian Coover-Cox**

The idea that the Lord is King shows up throughout the Bible as a way of helping us to understand who he is. One of the problems that I think Americans have is that we have very little experience with human kings. Meanwhile, other places in the world have experience with kings, and they're bad ones. So, it's easy to have a mistaken notion about the Lord being King. In the book of Exodus, we get a strong idea of God's kingship, and it helps us to understand what's going on in that book. When Moses comes to talk to Pharaoh, he comes and speaks to Pharaoh in the way an ancient Near Eastern messenger would who was coming from a great king. At that time in Egypt, and in the ancient Near East as a whole... people knew that there were five great kings as a, basically, a title — lots of little kings but five big ones at the time. Egypt, the people of Egypt, particularly Pharaoh, were convinced that, really, there was only one king. It was Pharaoh. And he thought of all the rest of the kings as chiefs. But Moses came and talked to him as the representative of his superior, as the King who is superior to Pharaoh. Pharaoh wants no part of that. But a big part of what's going on in the book is the demonstration that the Lord is the King who is Pharaoh's superior and to whom Pharaoh needs to give allegiance. Oh, and by the way, the Israelites need to give allegiance, and the nations need to give allegiance, and you and I need to give allegiance because he's the King. Years ago, a friend of mine who grew up in Belgium mentioned that the King of Belgium had died, and she was sad about that. She's an ordinary citizen, not part of the royal family, but she was sad that the king had died and she said, "He was a good king." I thought, I've never had that experience. He was someone whose voice she heard during World War II over the radio when Belgium had been overrun by the Nazis. He pictured for her, in a sense, the nation, what the best of the nation was about. Well, to know the Lord as the great King is to know, "Oh, this is what we're supposed to be like. This is the one who rules over our lesser kings and chiefs and judges." And we need that.

## Question 2:

### How should Christians today respond to the kingship of God?

#### **Dr. Richard Lints**

We use the language of king as a reference to God to refer to the way in which he rules over all that is — over his creation, over his people, over the church. Now, making sense of that in modern society is difficult. We realize how significant that language is in its ancient context, but in the modern world, the language of king and kingdom, though we recognize those terms, doesn't resonate in our own political experience; we live in democracies. And so, mindful that as we read the Scriptures and it uses the language of God as King, it's pulling this term from a context quite different from ours. On the other hand, we do still bump into authorities that tell us what to do regardless of our own convictions, regardless of our own opinions. The police car that pulls us aside after we've gone over the speed limit, nonetheless, tells us what to do, and we listen. There are authorities in our lives that impose limits. A king imposes ultimate limits, an ultimate king especially. And so, we're affirming in God's kingly office that God rules with an imposed order. Gracious, kind, merciful, wise, all of the above, yes, but at the end of the day, God is King.

#### **Rev. Ric Rodeheaver**

I love particularly in the book of Daniel you see this interaction between Nebuchadnezzar, who at that time was the most powerful individual in the known world, made humble, and for many years, until finally he realized who actually is the King. And in that moment, his sanity is restored to him. I think that concept, however, is kind of hard for moderns to grapple with. In our cultures, the move to democracy is seen as progressive and the right way, and kingship and kingdoms seem so antiquated and so the wrong way to do things. The reality is that democracy is only good because man is actually wicked, and we need all these checks and balances. God as a king is a really good thing. We want a king. We want God as our king. I remember once hearing a quote — it was wonderful — it says, "I'm not against slavery because men are not fit to be slaves. I'm against slavery because men are not fit to be masters." That's absolutely right, because the heart of man is wicked. So there is one righteous One, and that is God, and he is the King, and that's something that we can all take comfort in.

#### **Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

God is King in that he rules and reigns over everything in his creation. He protects as a king, he defends as a king, he provides as a king. His rule and reign, though, is everywhere. It's not limited to certain geographical boundaries. It's everywhere because he's the Creator of everything. And so that means we're his subjects. We submit to him as King. We depend on him for our protection and our provisions as King as well. And so, we're part of his kingdom as his people, and he rules over his kingdom as our King.

### **Question 3:**

#### **What are the main ways we can come to know God?**

##### **Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia**

When we come to the issue of knowing God, we don't have to go too far because God's knowledge is in the footprint of creation. Scientists are still trying to wonder the way human body is put together, the way the nature is put together, the universe is put together... But it's not just limited to that. God gave us a specific revelation in the form of the Bible, and right from Genesis 1:1 all the way to Revelation, he explained to us how we can know him; not only know him, how we can have personal relationship with him. And there's an inner consciousness that God has created, that if you want to not believe in God, you have to fight to come up with the ways that there is no God. But even a child, you know, a six-month-old kid does something wrong and you can see that on their face that, "I've done something wrong." Why does he feel that way? Because there is the imprint of God upon our conscience about right and wrong... Just look around, you'll see the evidence of God. But there's more than that. It is special revelation in the written form in the Bible.

##### **Dr. William Edgar**

Some of the main ways we can come to know God are by what theologians call "general revelation" — this means revelation outside of Scripture and miracles. General revelation includes the world around us. It speaks of God; it articulates God, as the Psalms tells us. It also can mean special providences, history, culture, all kinds of evidence from the world outside. It includes internal revelation. We know God because we're constituted to know him. We are made after his image, and part of that image that we bear is dependent on a God-consciousness. So we know him from sure internal evidence. It can take the form of moral leanings, conscience. It can take the form of knowing that God is there. Romans 1 is extremely clear that we know God, not just we know something is out there somewhere, but we really know God himself in his attributes, his power and divinity. And then the other way we know Scripture is through special revelation, which includes things like miracles, prophecies, and the inscripturation of God's revelation in a form that's been handed down over the centuries and in a form which we can have in translation. We call it the Bible. The center of the Bible is Jesus Christ, so he would be the central way we can come to know God. General and special revelation complement one another; they're dependent on one another. So it's not that you start with one and end with the other. They both have authority and sufficiency and clarity and necessity, they both function appropriately for their purpose. And so, the knowledge of God is inescapable, fortunately for us, but that also means we are responsible for what we know, and we can't come up to the judgment, the day of accountability and say, "God, I really couldn't find you anywhere." The story goes that Bertrand Russell, the great atheist, he was asked, what if you go on the other side and you appear for God? What are you going to say to him? He said, "Oh, I'll say there wasn't enough evidence." I guess, I don't think that ever happened. There's plenty of evidence even for skeptics and

atheists. Sometimes the evidence cuts across their claims, but that knowledge of God is inescapable.

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider**

The only way we could come to know God is if God takes the initiative to disclose himself, to reveal himself, to make himself known to us. And the Scripture teaches that he has done so in three main ways. He has revealed himself in his word that God speaks, and though sometimes, God reveals himself in his word that is mediated through humans — that the Scriptures are the words of God mediated through human spokespersons — God reveals himself in his Word. Scriptures teach that God reveals himself in his world. God reveals himself, the psalmist says in Psalm 19, in the heavens and the earth. Then Paul says in Romans 1 that creation reveals God's eternal power and divine nature. So, God reveals himself in the world. And then God reveals himself primarily, ultimately, finally in the Word who has come into the world. And what John does in John 1 is take us back to Genesis 1, that the Word of creation is the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. So, we know who God is in three, by means of three main forms of revelation: his word, his world, and the Word who has come into the world. And the final Word is the most important word — that we know who God is because he's revealed in his Son.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

I love the Hebrew word for “know.” It means to experience or to encounter. And so, when we come to know the Lord, to experience him and to encounter, it's interesting the various ways that we might be able to do that. One of the ways is, first off, God, in his prevenient grace is coming to us and preparing our lives for him. Prevenient grace simply means “the grace that goes before”; he's preparing all hearts to receive the Lord. Then of course you get down to something like general revelation. I mean, the mountains bespeak of his glory, the stars, the rivers, the grass and the flowers. And then of course you've got specific revelation, special revelation that comes to us; we can know God through the Bible. We can know God through a conversational life with him, otherwise known as prayer. We can know God as someone disciples us and pours their life into us. We can know God as we worship corporately together. So there are various ways we can experience him, to encounter him, and that's what God wants. He wants us to *know* him.

## **Question 4:**

### **What does creation tell us about God?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

The Bible teaches that God's creation tells us something about the very nature of God. For example, this verse in Romans 1:20: “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” And Paul says here what is reflected in the rest of the Scriptures, places like Psalm 19 for

example, which indicate that God is to be seen in his creation. So, as we look at the created world around us, there's a sense in which the Creator has left his fingerprints all over his creation so that as we look at creation we can see something of the identify of God, a God who is creative, a God who is glorious, and a God who continues to care for his created world.

**Dr. Joel C. Hunter**

It says in Romans ... that from the beginning of time, from the beginning of the creation that God's invisible attributes, divine nature, so on and so forth, had been clearly seen through that which has been made. And so, when we look at creation, we can notice two things. First of all, we can notice the tremendous artistry of God, just the beauty of his creation, and the intricacy of his operation. We know that there is a God who is sovereign, who is in control, but who doesn't just create things so that they will work. He creates things in order to engage ultimately the appreciative part of his creation, people. But he also does this in such a way that he communicates his methods of operation, that is, we sense in his creation... Kepler said one time when he had made a discovery, "I am thinking God's thoughts after him." There's this sense in which as God communicates himself through general revelation, that is, through the book of nature, it makes out specific revelation, that is, our Bible, the Scriptures, make all kinds of sense because you can see the same principles that he used in the specific revelation, our Bible, in the general revelation. And you can teach about who God is through his creation. And so, both theologian and scientist can come together in praise out of what they have seen and what they've experienced.

**Dr. Michael D. Williams**

God wants to reveal himself. He's not hiding. I sometimes use the analogy here of fingerprints. We human beings, we can't help but leave our fingerprints all over the place; everything we make says something about us. This chair just didn't happen. It says something about the values, the expertise of its maker. And that's true of God too. Augustine called it the "divine *vestigia*," the prints of his fingers. Of course, that line comes straight from Psalm 8. But the prints of his fingers, now here, we're learning that it's not just an accident that God's fingerprints are all over the place. It's intentional. Let me put it this way: God signs his work. And *Westminster* put this in a wonderful way. If I can quote from *Westminster* here, this is Chapter 7, paragraph 1:

**The distance between God and the creature is so great that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part.**

In other words, God himself crosses the boundary between his majesty and our creatureliness. Calvin spoke of it as an accommodation, or famously as a nurse lisping to an infant... It's an act ... of God's benevolence that he wants to speak himself into his creation and speak himself to his creatures so that we can have relationship with him. Now, that right there comes with all kinds of benefits, that he has revealed himself in the order of creation. Psalm 19 so wonderfully puts it, "day

after day,” that he reveals himself--- It’s going on all the time. And it’s saying something about what God values. After human beings rebelled and brought sin into God’s world, it didn’t stop the fact that he wanted to reveal himself. It didn’t stop the fact that he values his creation. It didn’t stop the fact that he values human beings.

### **Question 5:**

#### **What are the benefits of general revelation for theology, and in particular, for the doctrine of God?**

##### **Dr. Bruce L. Fields**

The benefits of general revelation have to be determined by, or at least are shaped by, what you understand general revelation to be. I understand it as that which we learn about God from the observance of the created realm, from creation in general — human beings understood as being part of that creation — and that there is an involvement of the intellect, the mind, to engage surroundings, and to form some conclusions. I believe that Romans 1 is particularly helpful in this realm to alert us to the fact that God’s divinity, God’s power, can be perceived in all of creation. I believe that that can be accentuated as you contemplate what human beings are and what human beings are capable of doing as created beings of God. And general revelation, not everyone would agree with this, but I do think that it kind of sets the tone or sets certain parameters of understanding for the eventual engagement, the hope for eventual engagement, with special revelation. Now, let me just say that it is general revelation, that I believe that another benefit of it is, it is the realm that we engage the nonbeliever. Believers and nonbelievers share this creation, and with all that happens in creation in general, it can provide platforms, frameworks, by which we can investigate why people understand God or why they understand deity the way that they do and have hopeful opportunity to then share biblical, Christian understanding. But it does provide this common ground with a nonbeliever that I see as a benefit.

##### **Dr. Jeffery Moore**

Anybody can tell when they look around them that there is a God, and without that basic thing happening inside of a person — specific revelation, you know, when God speaks to us through his holy Word — would be handicapped, I think. If you didn’t have a sense that God existed at all because you see him in creation, then would you look for him? Would you wonder about him? What, you know, would you want to learn more about him?

##### **Dr. Glenn R. Kreider**

For the last couple of centuries theologians have distinguished between two forms of divine revelation. Both forms come from God. They are the revelation, the unveiling disclosure of God in general revelation and special revelation: general revelation including things like creation, which are available to everyone, special revelation which are limited in time in space... I believe Romans 1 teaches us that what is revealed in creation is God’s eternal power and his divine nature, and so that any



understanding of God that fails to include and consider what we know about God from what he has made, is a theology of God that is incomplete and perhaps even inaccurate, because if God's revelation in creation, in nature, is plain, clear — Paul says it is understood and rejected — we know more than there is a powerful Creator, we know that there is an *eternal*, powerful Creator, and only the God who is, possesses the attribute of eternity.

### **Question 6:** **What is natural theology?**

#### **Dr. Steven C. Roy**

Natural theology is a study of God and truths that we learn about God from his general revelation. Christians have always felt that our knowledge of God must start with God, with his revelation. God being infinite, we being finite, we can ever reach up to him ourselves... God must take the initiative, through his revelation. And Scripture indicates that God reveals himself in two broad ways: general revelation and special revelation. The general revelation involves God's revelation of himself through the created order, the created universe, which Psalm 19 tells us, "declares the glory of God," through human persons who are created in the image of God, and so to study them either individually or collectively. Special revelation, on the other hand, comes through his word, in Scripture, and supremely through the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Natural theology is a knowledge of God that is gained by general revelation alone. It's gained through the use of human reason analyzing what God has revealed through that created universe and through human persons made in the image of God. The key thing to understand about natural theology is that it doesn't use any of the special revelation through Scripture at all. It's knowledge of God gained through general revelation alone.

#### **Dr. Bruce L. Fields**

Natural theology, I would say, is the formulation, the building of a system of theology with full disclosure of an understanding of God, and man, humanity — these kinds of categories — that is largely built upon, though, the building blocks of general revelation. That is to say that there is an involvement of projection. Human beings are constructed a certain way. We love; we have these feelings, these capacities. And what oftentimes happens in the realm of natural theology is the projection, or the ideal level of human capacity that is then projected into God. All right, so that it is possible to construct a view of God in terms of who he is and what he is like ... but it is largely built upon, first, the building blocks from general revelation, but then admittedly things like analogy of being, projection into this formulation of God, and then subsequent areas of theology can be deduced from this initial understanding of who God is and what God is like.



## Question 7:

### Can human beings be saved by general revelation alone?

#### Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Psalm 19 says that, "the heavens declare the glory of God." Indeed, everything in creation tells us something of who God is. Its reason for its existence is to display the glory of God, to show who he is, different things about him. And so Romans 1 tells us that from general revelation, that revelation of God available to all people at all times, can tell us vital and important things about God, like his power, his wisdom, his greatness. But it can never tell us that he loves us. It can never tell us that he sent his Son to die for us. For that, we need him to speak to us directly and personally. And that's what he does in his Word. That's why the power of general revelation is wonderful. But without the specific revelation God's given us in Scripture, we wouldn't ever be able to have a relationship with him that we do in Christ, that we desperately need.

#### Dr. Michael D. Williams

Despite all the positive things we can say about general revelation ... there is no redemptive word within it. Certainly the Shorter Catechism begins by asking the question, "What's the chief end of man?" That word "end" is so wonderful — *telos* — it could be both purpose and destiny. The chief end of man is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." But under the reality of our sinfulness, our fallenness, something else is necessary. And hear the *Confession of Faith*, how it begins in Chapter 1, paragraph 1 is this:

**Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God as to leave men unexcusable; yet [they're] not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and ... His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore, it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners to reveal Himself.**

As fallen creatures we need — and I'm going to use Calvin's imagery here — we need to be returned to a knowledge of God as our Creator, and we need to be brought to a knowledge of God as our Redeemer.

#### Dr. Simon Vibert

Christian theologians talk about general revelation as well as special revelation, and when we speak about general revelation, it helps us have a common language with nonbelievers about the personhood and the doctrine of God. So, the assumption is that everybody has imprinted upon them a conscience, a sense, an awareness of God in which, without the help of special revelation, it won't go very far, but it enables us to tap into that, as it were, in talking to nonbelievers. Similarly, with the created world around, in the early chapters of Romans, Paul talks about the fact that God has been eloquent through the general revelation that comes through the created world. Now,

we need more, but it enables us to have a first conversation and have expectations that God is at work, even through the nonbelieving world, because the whole of creation is still his.

### **Question 8:**

#### **How important are the Scriptures in the life of the believer?**

##### **Dr. Guy Waters**

2 Timothy 3 offers us one of the most important statements about the Scripture in Scripture. Paul begins by reminding Timothy — he's not telling Timothy this for the first time, but he's reminding him — that the Scripture is "God-breathed." It's the only place in the New Testament where that word shows up. And it's telling us that every word of the Bible proceeds from the mouth of God, and it is the Word of God from start to finish and down to the very words. But then he goes on to explain what the Word of God does in the life of God's people, and he says the Word of God teaches us, it's given to us for doctrine, it brings correction into our life, and it trains us. So, it tells us the sins that we're to avoid, it shows us the commands that God has given us to keep, and all of this, of course, points us to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one in whom we have life. He is the one who teaches us. He is the one who, as our prophet, guides us in the way of righteousness, and he does that in the words of Scripture.

##### **Dr. Joseph D. Fantin**

Second Timothy 3:16 is a great verse for us to remember what Scripture is. Paul, reflecting on his Scriptures, probably the Old Testament and by application I think we can assume the New Testament would affirm today, but first of all, he suggested the Scriptures are God-breathed, they are inspired, they are coming from God. And we see this even in Galatians that he talks about learning God's revelation, about specific aspects of his theology. So, this is an important part of his understanding of Scripture. It's not just for knowledge, though. It's for us to be trained. It's for us to be equipped. It's for us to be reproved. It's for us to, essentially, be made better people. So, the Christian really does need to stay in the Scriptures, and that's what they're there for, one of the reasons they're there for.

##### **Rev. Larry Cockrell**

First and foremost, the Scripture is God-breathed, and being breathed out by God, they are beneficial, profitable for us, the children of God, for the purpose of: number 1, sanctification; number 2, in addition to sanctification, also for equipping us for every good work in the world. And so we look to the Scriptures, and as we look to the Scriptures, not only are we being sanctified, not only are we being matured spiritually, God is also equipping us and preparing us to be his representatives in the world, to be salt, to be light, and in that regard, impacting the world around us.

## Question 9:

### Why does Scripture sometimes describe God as mysterious?

#### Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

The Bible actually talks about mystery in a couple of different important ways. It's important to clarify the differences because sometimes in English, when we think about the word "mystery," we think about a certain thing that's strange, or unknowable, or something we can't understand. And in the Bible, when it talks about mystery — it talks about the mystery of God, the mystery of the gospel — one of the ways that it talks about that is that it was something that was hidden at one time but that it became known at another time. So, a mystery becomes something that wasn't fully comprehended or understood. There were elements that were revealed, but it wasn't until later on in the plan and purpose of God that that mystery was finally unveiled and we began to see the fruition of that idea that God had, for example in the Old Testament, began to explain the mystery of his plan of salvation. But in the New Testament, it becomes an unveiling of that plan through Christ... The second kind of mystery, which most people in English-speaking countries think of, is that kind of idea that God is not as easily known, or he is somehow hard to understand, that, "God is a mystery to me." And so, that second notion is that there is still an element of uncertainty or unknowability in God and that the concept of mystery encapsulates the idea that God has revealed things, he has purposes and plans, he has let us know who he is in his character, but part of that character and that infinity that God possesses within himself is a mystery to us. Our finite minds can't fully grasp that notion of all that God is and all that God has in store.

#### Dr. Lynn Cohick

Scripture will talk about God as mysterious, and I think part of that is that God is holy. And humans now, in our existence now, after the Fall, are not. And so there's a mystery of holiness and purity that is beyond our experiences as we exist now, and so there's a mystery there. I think also, there's a mystery in terms of God's mercy. God doesn't act as humans do. God is not out for, as Shakespeare says, "a pound of flesh." He doesn't have our selfish instincts. And that can come off as mysterious. Then I would say also, there's another way that at least the apostle Paul uses the word "mysterious." Paul will talk about God's salvation plan as a mystery now revealed. In Ephesians 3, for example, he'll talk about this mystery that has been made known now — this mystery that Gentiles are included with Jews in Christ to make the church. And Paul says this is mysterious and that the powers and principalities look on this in surprise at God's amazing wisdom, at God's amazing love. So those are some of the ways that Scripture talks about God as mysterious.

**Question 10:**  
**What do theologians mean when they say that God is  
incomprehensible?**

**Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.**

The incomprehensibility of God pertains to the truth that we're not going to grasp everything there is to grasp about God. Even when we're with him in heaven, we're still not going to really grasp him. If we could grasp him, we ourselves would be God. So there are certain elements both in our existence now and our future eternal existence where we're just not going to get our brains around. That's a reality we can't beat. Now in the early church, there was a theological development, we call this "apophatic theology." Apophatic theology focuses on what we can't really even say about God — God's unknowability. Today it seems in many theological circles we want to focus on the things that we *can* say about God, which is great. But in modernity it seems that the drive is to solve all the mysteries, to rule out all the incongruities, and to have everything ironed out and stated. But the Bible never promises that. Sometimes we take our enlightenment modern lens and say, "You know, unless we solve every riddle, this doesn't make sense." We hold God up to a bar of rationalism. That's what the enlightenment teaches us to do. That's not what Scripture teaches us to do.

**Dr. Gary H. Burge**

When theologians say that God is incomprehensible what they're trying to describe is the ineffable mystery who God is. God is not a creature. God is not a part of this creation at all. God comes from a life and reality that is beyond our imagining. So in John 1, John's gospel says clearly that no one has ever seen God. In fact, if you were to see God in his fullness you would not be able to survive. You would die. He's too great, too overwhelming, too majestic, too powerful. So therefore when God presents himself to us as creatures, he has to present himself in a creaturely form. Moses meets God up on mount Sinai; he meets God as a burning bush, because Moses would have never been able to see God in the fullness of his full identity. So likewise with us, we cannot understand God in who he is completely, but God has bridged that gap of knowledge by presenting himself to us in his Son Jesus Christ. Now, here's the key. We then can know God through Jesus Christ and that means that as we know the Son, we will be able to know the Father. So God has really helped us understand who he is by reducing himself, condensing himself, as in Philippians 2, "emptying himself, taking on the form of a servant," whom we know to be Jesus Christ.

**Dr. Gareth Cockerill**

The incomprehensibility of God is ... an important part of our worship. When I come to worship God, the Lord, the Triune God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and provided for our salvation through Christ's death on the cross, through his incarnation, death on the cross, resurrection, ascension and session at God's right hand, who sits there now ready to minister to me and to all of his people the grace that we need, the forgiveness and cleansing and grace that we need to live. When I

worship him, I worship him with adoration for all that I know about him, for his great love and his redemption. But I also worship with a sense of awe, because I realize that this God is so much more than what I understand... C.S. Lewis has a good statement somewhere, though, that the prayer before all prayers is that it be the real “I” who prays, and it be the real “Thou” to whom I pray. And so, it’s important, if we’re going to pray to the real God and not to some God that we’ve made up in our own minds, some limited idea of God — which really turns out to be an idol even if it is not shaped in an image — that we remember that he has revealed himself and that revelation is wonderful, it’s our salvation, we are accountable before it, and we are amazed at his love for us. And yet, he is far, far more than that. I think sometimes some of the hard passages in the Bible help us to remember that, some of the things that people were squeamish about in the Old Testament. You know, you just need to remember that we can’t put God in our box. And when we say, “define the love of God,” it’s not defined by my idea of love, it’s defined by God himself in Scripture, in what he has done, and how he has revealed himself... He is knowable in that he has revealed himself. If he hadn’t have revealed himself we wouldn’t know anything. But he is knowable in that he has revealed himself, but he is incomprehensible in his fullness, is very, very important in our understanding of God and in our worship of him and obedience to him.

### **Question 11:**

**Does the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility mean that we can’t really know God?**

#### **Dr. Steven C. Roy**

When we speak of God being incomprehensible or the incomprehensibility of God, we mean that we, as humans, can never know God fully or exhaustively understand him. Now that truth must be balanced out against the complementary truth, also found in Scripture, that God is knowable. In other words, by God’s grace to us and through his revelation, we are able to know true realities about God and, far more importantly, to know God personally. So, the knowability and the incomprehensibility of God are both realities that we must hold together. And that’s very important.

When you think about the incomprehensibility of God and you say, “Why would this be true?” three reasons come to mind. First of all, God is infinite and we as humans are finite. So how in the world could finite human brains ever hope to fully comprehend an infinite God? Secondly, God is holy, and we fallen humans are sinful, and our sin separates us from God. And so this gap, already huge, because of the Creator-creature gap — infinite Creator, finite creature — now is intensified with a moral gap. And thirdly and finally, there are some things that God chooses not to reveal to us. The book of Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy 29:29, distinguishes, says that “the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever.” There are some things that God chooses not to reveal to us and so we will not, we never will know them. For those three reasons, God always will remain incomprehensible to us. While we can know God truly, we will never

know God fully or exhaustively... I want to suggest that it's really important for us as Christians to hold to both sides of these complementary truths of his incomprehensibility and his knowability. God's incomprehensibility guards us against an over-rationalism that seeks to, sort of, arrogantly assert that we can understand everything about God and we can wrap it all up in a nice little box. The knowability of God guards us against an utter agnosticism that says that because God is so vast we can't know anything about him. Surely there is a way in the middle that holds together both truths of God's incomprehensibility and his knowability.

**Rev. Dan Hendley**

Theologians may mean different things when they say God is incomprehensible. Some would suggest by that term that we really can't know anything about God. But Christians can't say that; those who believe God has revealed himself in the Scripture would never say that. But we still believe that God is incomprehensible in this sense, that we can never wrap our minds around who God is, we can never fully grasp who God is. Any God that can speak and throw galaxies into existence is certainly going to be a creature beyond my puny capacity to figure out completely. But what the Bible tells us is that God can be known, *truly* known, but he's never going to be known completely. And that's what theologians typically mean when they speak of God's incomprehensibility.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

Incomprehensibility in God is an interesting idea because we often think of revelation as having God revealed himself and made himself known in various and a variety of ways. But when we really think about the nature of who God is, we have to understand that we only know, even from general and special revelation, a tiny fraction, portion, of his actual nature, because of his infinitude. The fact that we are finite and God is infinite makes it an incomprehensible adventure to think about the idea that God, the God of the universe, the God of all creation — and the size of the universe as we understand it increasingly through astronomy and the study of galaxies and stars and planets, and the immensity of creation — we realize, wow, we know very, very little about how infinite, how majestic, how magnificent God is. And so, when we talk about incomprehensibility, we don't mean that we don't know anything about God or that we can't understand him, but we are referring to the fact that God is so much greater than our finite and small understanding and comprehension of him, that it really helps us appreciate the fact that he would stoop to our level, reveal something of himself, but also that we will spend an eternity together with him, plumbing the depths and we will never get to the bottom of who he is... So, it's important as we talk about incomprehensibility to make sure that we're not talking about that God can't be known, but we are talking about that we have true knowledge of God, but we do not have *comprehensive* knowledge of God, and that the knowledge we have is right and good and understandable, but that God is so far beyond our categories and abilities of understanding that he is, in fact, in that regard, incomprehensible.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry**

Well, when theologians say that God is incomprehensible, it doesn't mean that we know nothing about God, but it does mean we don't know everything about God. There are things that God has revealed about who God is, and there are things that he hasn't yet revealed, things that are going to be beyond us. So, his thoughts are above our thoughts, his ways are above our ways, the prophet Isaiah tells us, so that's a reminder that there are things that God has let us know about himself, and there are things that he hasn't. And the incomprehensibility is a recognition there are things we don't know about God, that does not need to alarm us. There are things we don't know about ourselves or about other people, but clearly God, on some vastly grander scale, there are things about him we just don't know.

**Rev. Clete Hux**

When theologians talk about God being incomprehensible, they're not talking about God being illogical or irrational. The incomprehensibility, actually the burden of that, is placed on us. We cannot fully comprehend God in his fullness. We know in part; we see in part; so even if we were not fallen in our original natures, we as creatures still couldn't really fully comprehend all that God is.

**Question 12:**

**What is the doctrine of the Trinity, and how should we distinguish between the persons of God and his essence?**

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry**

When we talk about the doctrine of the Trinity, the classic language is we have one God in three persons — one substance in three persons. Well, what do we mean by that? Well, we're saying there is only one God. So, this is a very important thing that Christians want to affirm. This is the great revelation we get throughout the Scriptures. There's only one God, not three. One. One God. But what we find is this one God reveals who God is in terms of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three persons; not three people but the three persons of the one God. So, we have the Father who sends the Son, the Son who after his death and resurrection goes to the Father, and they send the Spirit. So, we can think about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It doesn't mean they only suddenly began in the creation. No, we can go back before the creation; God was already Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, one God in three persons. But what we see in the world, in the creation, that God interacts with the world as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus taught us to call God Father. Jesus taught us about the Holy Spirit. So, perhaps the most direct way unto understanding this is there's only one God in three persons. And perhaps, the other thing that's helpful to me is if you go to a place like Matthew 10 and you hear Jesus talking about whoever receives one of these little ones, one of my disciples, in my name, they receive me, and whoever receives me receives the One who sent me. So, what we're seeing there, the disciple who has the Spirit of God in them, is not just receiving that disciple, they receive the Son of God. And when they receive the Son of God, they receive the



Father. That's clearly not three separate people. It's one God in three persons. I know we're getting complicated there. I'm going to back off, but what we're trying to say is it's one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Dr. Jeffery Moore**

In Christian theology we talk about God as triune — the Trinity, one in three and three in one — because that's how the Bible talks about him. We don't try to fit God into this Trinity-shaped box or whatever it is. You know, so many folks that don't understand God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who don't like the idea of Trinity, fuss about the fact the Bible doesn't use that term and so forth. But the term is irrelevant. The point is to talk about God in ways that are consistent with the way the Bible talks about God... And so we come up with terms like "essence" and "person." When I say "we," I'm talking about Christians a long time ago who took words that existed in Greek and Latin, and now we use the words person and essence, for example, to talk about the Trinity. God's essence is one; his person is three. To try to understand how those all fit together, we just go back to the Bible and find that the Bible talks about God as Father, and so we talk about this person of Father. It talks about God as Son. It talks about God as Holy Spirit... As long as we're constantly checking against what the Bible actually says, we'll stay in the right parameters and hopefully have some useful dialogue that helps us think about God's great love for us and how he wants to relate to us.

**Rev. Clete Hux**

In the doctrine of the Trinity, distinguishing between the person *and* the essence is we talk about being one, we're referring to his essence or nature or substance. But when we talk about God being three, we're talking about not tri-theism or polytheism, we're talking about three persons that all share in that one essence or nature that is God.

### **Question 13:**

#### **What is an attribute of God?**

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

An attribute of God is simply an aspect of his character. It's something we know to be true about him. It's important, though, to think about attributes personally and wholistically. As soon as we think about attributes, it's plural, and we want to make a list of them, which is appropriate and helpful, but we would never want to reduce God to a list of anything, because he's a person and we need to think of him as wholistically as we can. I wouldn't want to be reduced to a mere list of things, although those can be helpful to get to know me. And so, to describe an aspect of God's character is a necessary and helpful thing to do, but only to get us to a wholistic, personal understanding of God as we can possibly get.



**Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia**

Attribute of God you could say, in a sense, is the quality, the essence, or one way to display his character, his being. And the mistake often time people have made, or other religions, or other systems, that you take an attribute and you start worshipping that attribute. For example, in Greek mythology, in Roman mythology, even in today in Hinduism you have that. For example, the Bible says that God is love. So now you make the "God of love," so you start worshipping the attribute rather than the God whose attributes you are talking about. So, attributes are like love, mercy, his faithfulness, his attribute to forgive, attribute of commitment, those are the essence of a person that you define the person of God, and those different characters, those different ways to understand him to know him is through his attributes.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry**

An attribute of God is a characteristic of God. It describes what God is like, it gives you some of the features that we recognize in God — God is love, God is good. It tells us the characteristics of God, like a character description of Almighty God.

**Dr. Joel C. Hunter**

An attribute of God is like an attribute of anyone. It's a way you know them because they have certain characteristics that are part of who they are. And with God, there are communicable attributes, that is, mercy and love and kindness, that as you get closer to him, those attributes become a part of who you are. There are also non-communicable attributes ... that we'll never have. But the important thing about an attribute is that you understand that person better so that you can form a more accurate relationship with them. In Christianity, it's all about the relationship. It's not just about understanding. It's understanding *so that* you can form a more close and more accurate, and therefore, a more intimate relationship with them.

---

**Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia** is Founder and President of North India Institute of Theological Studies in Chandigarh, India.

**Dr. Gary H. Burge** is Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College.

**Dr. Gary Cockerill** is Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

**Rev. Larry Cockrell** is Senior Pastor of Household of Faith Church and faculty member of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Lynn Cohick** is Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College.

**Dr. Dorian G. Coover-Cox** is Associate Professor of Old Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. William Edgar** is Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Joseph D. Fantin** is Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Bruce L. Fields** is Chair of the Biblical and Systematic Theology Department and Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman** is Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship at Wesley Biblical Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

**Rev. Dan Hendley** is Senior Pastor of North Park Church in Wexford, PA.

**Dr. Joel C. Hunter** is Senior Pastor of Northland, A Church Distributed in Longwood, FL.

**Rev. Clete Hux** is Director and Counter-Cult Apologist at Apologetics Resource Center, a Christian ministry which encompasses the full range of Christian Apologetics.

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider** is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Richard Lints** is Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum** is Professor of Theology and Academic Dean at Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, PA.

**Dr. Jeffery Moore** served at Trinity Downtown Orlando as Senior Pastor from 2003 to 2014.

**Nicholas Perrin (Ph.D.)** is the Franklin S. Dyrness Professor of Biblical Studies and Dean of the Graduate School at Wheaton College.

**Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe** is Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

**Rev. Ric Rodeheaver (Ph.D. candidate)** is Administrative Elder and Lead Pastor at Grace Evangelical Free Church in Orange County, California.

**Dr. Steven C. Roy** is Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry** is Dean and President of Trinity School for Ministry. He is also Professor of Systematic Theology.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes** is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University and is a frequent guest speaker at churches, conferences, and retreats, in addition to co-pastoring a local church.

**Dr. Simon Vibert** is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.

**Dr. Guy Waters** is Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

**Dr. Michael D. Williams** is Professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler** is resident faculty member of Theological and Historical Studies at East Asia School of Theology.

# We Believe in God

LESSON  
TWO

## HOW GOD IS DIFFERENT



Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, study guides and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### **ABOUT THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES**

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Third Millennium has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Third Millennium Ministries is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org)

# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Identification .....</b>	<b>2</b>
A. Biblical Foundation	2
B. Theological Variety	3
1. Augsburg Confession	4
2. Belgic Confession	4
3. Westminster Shorter Catechism	5
C. Biblical Perspectives	7
1. Divine Transcendence	7
2. Divine Immanence	11
<b>III. Integration .....</b>	<b>13</b>
A. Biblical Foundation	13
B. Theological Variety	15
1. Augsburg Confession	15
2. Belgic Confession	16
3. Westminster Shorter Catechism	16
C. Biblical Perspectives	17
1. Being	17
2. Wisdom	18
3. Power	19
4. Holiness	21
5. Justice	22
6. Goodness	23
7. Truth	24
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>25</b>

# We Believe in God

## Lesson Two

### How God Is Different

#### INTRODUCTION

---

I was once told about a young man who was taking his friend to hear a new musician in town. “You’re going to love this guy,” he assured his companion.

“Who is he like?” his friend asked.

The young man replied with excitement in his voice, “He’s not like anyone you’ve ever heard before. You’ll be amazed at how different he is.”

We’ve all had experiences like this. There are always ways in which people we admire are like others, but these commonalities usually don’t catch our attention. More often than not, what makes us admire them most is how different they are from others. And in many ways, the same kind of thing is true about God. Every faithful follower of Christ honors and worships God for all that he is and all that he does. But what frequently lifts our spirits in amazement is how gloriously different God is from everything he has created.

This is the second lesson in our series, *We Believe in God*, a series devoted to exploring the doctrine of God, or theology proper in systematic theology. We’ve entitled this lesson, “How God Is Different.” In this lesson, we’ll focus on what theologians have often called God’s incommunicable attributes, how gloriously unlike his creation God is.

In our last lesson, we defined divine attributes as:

**The perfections of God’s essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.**

The attributes of God are those qualities of his essence without which he’d no longer be God.

We also saw that theologians have commonly spoken of two main types, or classes, of God’s attributes. His communicable attributes are those qualities of God’s essence that creation can share in limited ways. His incommunicable attributes are those qualities of God’s essence that creation cannot share. In this lesson, we’ll concentrate on the second of these classes, God’s incommunicable attributes — how he is wondrously different from his creation.

**When we talk about who God is and what Scripture reveals to us about who God is — what people call the attributes of God — people break them up into communicable, which mean things that are like us, or incommunicable, things that are very different between God and us... Why is that distinction important? It’s important because it helps us to understand who God is — God as distinct... If we think about a word like “aseity,” which means that God exists only by making himself exist. In other words, he depends on nothing;**

**whereas, we are dependent on him for our existence — that's the kind of thing that tells us, okay, there's something very different about who God is from who we are. So, the incommunicable and communicable attributes distinction is good for helping us to know who God is, but also helping us to know how God is God and we are not.**

**— Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.**

Our lesson on the attributes that reveal how God is different from his creation will divide into two main parts. First, we'll look at the process of identification, how we should identify and define God's incommunicable attributes. And second, we'll explore the process of integration, how we should integrate our beliefs about this set of divine attributes with our understanding of God's other perfections. Let's begin with the identification of God's incommunicable perfections.

## **IDENTIFICATION**

---

There are many ways to approach the identification of these divine attributes. But for the sake of time, we'll touch on just three key issues. First, we'll see the biblical foundation for pursuing this goal. Second, we'll note the theological variety among evangelicals on these matters. And third, we'll focus on the breadth of biblical perspectives we must keep in view as we define God's incommunicable attributes. Let's look at the biblical foundation for identifying these divine perfections.

## **BIBLICAL FOUNDATION**

General revelation gives us many insights into God's incommunicable attributes when we contrast the qualities of God's essence with the qualities of his creation. Medieval Scholastics called this strategy "*via negationis*," or "the way of negation." But, as we've seen, throughout history God has given his people special revelation to guide us as we reflect on general revelation. And for followers of Christ today, this means that we must do all we can to rest our beliefs about these matters on the foundation of biblical teaching.

As we mentioned in our previous lesson, in the patristic and medieval periods, theology proper was deeply influenced by concepts of God in Hellenistic philosophies. Hellenistic philosophies emphasized that God is transcendent and, therefore, utterly removed from history. Under this influence, Christian theologians recognized the incommunicable attributes of God on nearly every page of Scripture. But, in the modern period, many influential critical theologians, and even a number of evangelicals, have turned from these Hellenistic influences. Rather than stressing God's transcendence, they've focused on his immanence — his involvement in history. And for this reason, it's quite common for many sincere Christians to downplay, and even deny, that the Bible



supports the traditional doctrine of God's incommunicable attributes. Because of the doubts about these matters, it will help to point to a basic outlook on God that permeates the Scriptures. We have in mind here how biblical authors and characters often referred to the fact that God is incomparable — he is matchless; without equal; supreme. For example, in 1 Kings 8:23, Solomon praised God at the dedication of the temple in this way:

**O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below (1 Kings 8:23).**

Notice how Solomon's declaration about God's incomparability is without exception. There is no god whether "in heaven above or on earth below" who is "like [God]". We find similar declarations in Psalm 71:19; Psalm 86:8; and Psalm 89:6. And in 2 Samuel 7:22 David said this:

**How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you (2 Samuel 7:22).**

As we see here, David spoke about God's incomparability in a way that revealed what it means to be God. David said that God is great and that no one [is] like [him]. But he also claimed that the Sovereign Lord — "the Lord, Yahweh," or *Adonai Yahweh* (אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה) in Hebrew — is so great that "there is no God but [God]." In saying this, David revealed that God's incomparability is essential to what makes God, God. Passages like Isaiah 40–46 and Job 40–41 do much the same.

These and similar passages establish the biblical foundation that justifies a careful study of God's incommunicable perfections. These verses reflect the consistent biblical teaching that God is beyond all comparisons with his creation. In a day when this facet of theology proper has been called into question in some circles, and dramatically minimized in others, Scripture continues to reveal God's incomparability. And his incomparability calls on us to learn all we can about how God is different from his creation.

Having noted the biblical foundation for the identification of God's incommunicable attributes, we should turn to a second issue, the theological variety that exists among evangelicals on these matters.

## THEOLOGICAL VARIETY

The Scriptures don't give us anything even close to a complete, authoritative list of God's incommunicable attributes. Instead, biblical teachings on these matters appear here and there, in this way and that. For this reason, identifying these divine perfections is similar to constructing intricately designed stained-glass windows out of shapes and hues that appear in different parts of the Bible. As you can imagine, there are many complex processes that go into recognizing these shapes and colors and synthesizing and cataloging them. So, even though we hold many outlooks in common, it shouldn't

surprise us that evangelicals have created different lists of God's incommunicable attributes.

We can gain a sense of this theological variety in a number of ways. But for the sake of convenience, let's look at three historical documents from different branches of the protestant church. First, we'll review the *Augsburg Confession*. Second, we'll consider the *Belgic Confession*. And third, we'll look at the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Let's turn first to the *Augsburg Confession*, written in 1530.

## Augsburg Confession

In our last lesson, we noted how the first article of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* summarizes God's attributes in this way:

**There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.**

As we can see, this article speaks of six divine perfections. Although it's something of an oversimplification, it's been common to associate the terms power, wisdom and goodness with God's communicable attributes. These are qualities that his creation, and especially humanity, shares on a creaturely scale. And it has also been common to identify eternal, without body, without parts and the term infinite with God's incommunicable attributes. These are ways in which God is different from his creation.

Keeping in mind the incommunicable attributes listed in the *Augsburg Confession*, let's observe the theological variety among evangelicals by turning to the Reformed *Belgic Confession*, written in 1561.

## Belgic Confession

In the first article of the *Belgic Confession* we read these words:

**There is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God ... he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.**

As we see here, along with noting that God is a spiritual Being, based on Jesus' words in John 4:24, the *Belgic Confession* describes God with ten other terms. Once again, it's an oversimplification, but by and large, theologians have treated the designations almighty, wise, just and good as communicable attributes, because we share power, wisdom, justice and goodness with God on a creaturely scale. The terms simple — which means that God is not divided into parts — eternal, incomprehensible — which means that we cannot understand anything about God completely — invisible, immutable — or unchangeable — and infinite have usually been taken as references to God's incommunicable attributes.

In our discussion on the theological variety involved in identifying God's attributes, we've seen how the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Belgic Confession* present the incommunicable attributes of God. Now, let's turn to our third important document, the Puritan *Westminster Shorter Catechism* written in 1647.

## Westminster Shorter Catechism

Question and Answer number 4 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* reads this way:

### What is God?

The catechism answers:

**God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.**

After describing God as a Spirit, the *Shorter Catechism* lists ten divine perfections. Again, we'll see later that these matters are complex, but it's common to speak of being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth as communicable attributes. And it's also common to identify infinite, eternal and unchangeable, or immutable, with God's incommunicable attributes.

When we set these lists of God's incommunicable attributes alongside each other, we can see that they are not the same. All three documents mention that God is eternal and infinite. But only the *Belgic Confession* and the *Shorter Catechism* state that God is a spiritual Being or a Spirit, and that God is immutable or unchangeable. Only the *Augsburg Confession* claims that God is without body and without parts. And only the *Belgic Confession* says that God is simple, incomprehensible and invisible.

As we can see from these comparisons, evangelicals have expressed God's incommunicable attributes in different ways. But how many substantial differences do these lists reflect?

When theological students first learn that evangelicals don't all use the same terminology for God's incommunicable attributes, they often assume that we believe very different things about God. As in every facet of systematic theology, it's true that variations among us often represent different theological emphases. But more often than not, differences in our lists of God's incommunicable attributes represent little more than variety in terminology. We speak in some detail about theological technical terms in our series *Building Systematic Theology*. So, it will suffice to make this simple point here: Although faithful followers of Christ have used different technical terms to list God's incommunicable attributes, by and large, these lists don't represent substantial differences in our concepts or beliefs about God.

As we've just noted, the *Augsburg Confession* mentions that God is without body. Although the *Belgic Confession* and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* don't use this expression, they still convey the same belief or concept. The *Belgic Confession* touches

on this when it says that God is a Spiritual Being and invisible. And *Westminster* affirms that God is a Spirit, and therefore, without body.

The *Augsburg Confession* also states that God is without parts. And the *Belgic Confession* says the same thing when it describes God as simple. As we mentioned earlier, “simple” is an older way of saying “undivided” or “without parts.” And *Westminster* covers this attribute when it says that God is infinite. He has no parts because his perfections have no limits.

In a similar way, only the *Belgic Confession* says that God is incomprehensible. But the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* imply this divine attribute by their use of the term infinite. Because God’s mind is without limits, we cannot comprehend him.

Clearly, theologians have catalogued the incommunicable attributes of God in different ways. But, as we’ve seen, our *concepts* of God aren’t significantly different. So, we should always look beyond particular technical terms and focus on the concepts or beliefs that they signify.

**When theologians do their work, or even when a number of believers come together to try to build confessions to be able to give to the church, to be able to describe the beliefs and the theology of the church, in all of those cases, you’re trying to describe the same reality, if the people really do agree. But they may make different choices. If we were to think about a description of God, I mean, we understand that God is one being in three persons, but God is one. And yet God has different attributes... It shouldn’t be a surprise that if we start talking about something that is that immense and that important that we might use different words... We need to try to seek what’s underlying what the words are trying to describe and be able to compare those things. And what can be more confusing is when two different groups of people use the same word to describe two very different things. And then we have to understand that we can’t just put the words next to each other. We have to try to dig behind the words to find out what those theologians, what those authors of these confessions are trying to describe, to be able to take what sits underneath it and to be able to compare that and see where there is and isn’t difference. And very often when we do that task we find there is less difference than we think there is because these are still confessions that are rooted in the authority of Scripture and the work of Christ. And so even if they take different words to describe that one reality, it’s still that one reality that they’re aimed at.**

— Dr. Tim Sansbury

This is especially important when we realize that other terms have been commonly used for these attributes as well. For instance, evangelicals commonly refer to the omnipresence of God, the fact that God is everywhere; the omniscience of God, the fact that he knows everything; and the omnipotence of God, the fact that God is all-

powerful. Many theologians also speak of the aseity of God, the fact that God is self-sufficient and independent from his creation; and the sovereignty of God, the fact that God is in total control of creation. To be sure, there are disagreements over some details of these doctrines. But, by and large, differences in terminology don't represent major differences of opinion among well-informed evangelical theologians.

Now that we've considered the biblical foundation for identifying how God is different from his creation, and the theological variety among evangelicals in this facet of the doctrine of God, we should give attention to the wide range of biblical perspectives that help us define these divine perfections more fully.

## **BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES**

It's one thing to come up with a list of terms to describe how God is different from his creation. It's another thing to identify these terms with the many relevant teachings of Scripture. God's incommunicable attributes are some of the most abstract concepts in Christian theology. As a result, Christians have often gone to extremes when determining what these terms mean. As we're about to see, we have to take into account a broad range of biblical perspectives about God if we hope to avoid serious misunderstandings of his incommunicable attributes.

To see the breadth of biblical perspectives that we must keep in mind, we'll look in two directions. First, we'll see how the Scriptures focus on divine transcendence to clarify God's incommunicable attributes. And second, we'll explore what the Scriptures teach about divine immanence. Let's look first at the biblical teaching on divine transcendence.

### **Divine Transcendence**

**Transcendence has this concept of above, above and beyond, so when we talk about the transcendence of God what we're saying is that he's — in a sense, it's picture language — we're saying in the way we think of God, we're to think of God as bigger and above merely human. So to talk about God's transcendence, or the divine transcendence, is to describe God as inherently, in his nature, God... not simply an idol, not a god who is maneuvered by humans or magically manipulated, but God. And so part of thinking through who God is, is accepting that he is actually God, and therefore worthy of worship... Isaiah: "holy, holy," this great, enormous God, the Creator, the master of time and space, above and beyond merely his creation, and above and beyond the manipulation of humans — transcendent. God in his own inherent nature.**

**— Dr. Josh Moody**

Simply put, when we speak of “divine transcendence” we mean that God isn’t restricted by the limitations he established for his creation. He’s above and beyond creation. *Every* standard list of God’s incommunicable attributes rests on what the Bible teaches about God’s transcendence. But for the sake of time and simplicity, we’ll explore the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 4, to illustrate what we mean.

The *Shorter Catechism* speaks of divine transcendence by listing three incommunicable perfections. It tells us that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. Let’s note first how the Scriptures teach that God is infinite.

**Infinite.** Many Christians are surprised to learn that the word “infinite” isn’t found in the Bible. Rather, it’s a philosophical technical term for a concept that appears in a variety of ways throughout Scripture. In English, we often translate “infinite” from two Latin theological terms. The first is *immensus*, which means “immeasurable” or “incalculable.” The second is *infinitus*, which means “unending” or “unlimited.” So, when we say that God is infinite, we mean that God is the opposite of his finite creation. He is immeasurable, incalculable, unending, and unlimited. Simply put: God’s perfections are without limits.

A number of biblical passages rather explicitly refer to different ways in which God is infinite. For example, in 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon indicated that God cannot be limited by space when he declared to God, “even the highest heaven, cannot contain you.” And, in Romans 11:33, Paul indicated that God’s knowledge and wisdom can’t be measured when he spoke of God’s “unsearchable ... judgments, and ... paths” that are “beyond tracing out.” And, as the Psalmist put it in Psalm 139:6, God is so great that knowledge of him is “too wonderful ... too lofty ... to attain.” These and similar passages indicate that it is right to speak of God as infinite in his perfections.

**God’s infinity is a way of speaking about God’s unlimitedness. We live in the coordinates of time and space. There is a progression of our own lives that takes place in time and in space. Even those two coordinates are difficult to talk about in the abstract. And so, when we speak of God’s infinity, we’re trying to articulate, communicate that God is not bounded in the same way we are by time and by space. So, God’s temporal existence, or spatial existence, is a kind of misuse of categories. God in one sense — again, we’re using language to speak about an experience beyond our own experience — is outside of time, but even then we’re using spatial language to talk about time. So to speak of God’s infinity is to say God is not limited in the ways that we are limited.**

— Dr. Richard Lints

In addition to affirming divine transcendence by revealing ways that God is infinite, the Scriptures also refer directly to the abstract idea that God is eternal.

**Eternal.** Our English word “eternal” is often used to translate the biblical terms “*ad*” (עד), “*olam*” (עולם) and occasionally “*natsach*” (נצח) in the Old Testament, and “*aión*”

(αἰών) and “*aiónios*” (αἰώνιος) in both the Greek Old Testament — or Septuagint — and the New Testament. Of course, these terms are also applied to facets of creation, but not in the same sense as they are applied to God. Creation is temporal, limited by time in many different ways. But God is not. God is eternal in the sense that God’s perfections are not subject to time.

A number of biblical passages speak of different dimensions of the eternality of God. For instance, 1 Timothy 1:17 speaks of God as the eternal ruler. It says, “Now to the King eternal ... the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.” Revelation 4:8, praises God as eternal when the heavenly creatures call him the one “who was, and is, and is to come.” And 2 Peter 3:8 speaks of how God transcends all of history when it says, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” These and many similar passages make it clear that God’s perfections are eternal.

**The Bible often speaks of God as eternal. That means from everlasting to everlasting, so there was no beginning when there wasn’t a God or when God did not exist. Creation is not eternal. Creation had a beginning. All of the universe had a beginning. God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. But God does not have a beginning. God has been from eternity without end, and God is God forever, so from everlasting to everlasting. And so, "eternal" would refer to that he’s from everlasting and to everlasting. There’s no time when God does not exist, either in the past or in the future.**

— Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe

The Scriptures not only demonstrate divine transcendence by establishing that God is infinite and eternal, they also explicitly point to the fact that God is unchangeable.

**Unchangeable.** There are a number of biblical expressions that indicate that God is unchangeable. The Hebrew verb “*shanah*” (שָׁנָה) means “to change.” The verb “*nacham*” (נָחַם) means “to change one’s mind.” And the New Testament Greek noun “*parallage*” (παράλλαξις) means “change” or “variation.” Common experience and the Bible make it clear that everything in creation is, at some level, changeable. But when these terms are applied to God, they speak of another way in which God is amazingly different from his creation. According to the Bible God’s perfections cannot change.

God himself said he was unchangeable rather plainly in Malachi 3:6. In this verse, he contrasted his own constancy with the instability of Israel’s commitment by stating, “I the Lord do not change.” Numbers 23:19 contrasts God with human beings by saying, God is “not a human being, that he should change his mind.” And in James 1:17, James assured his audience of God’s consistency by describing him as “the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” These and similar passages depict God as one who is immutable or unchangeable.

**God doesn’t change, and that comes specifically straight from the Bible in many places, but most obviously, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever.” The Bible is clear that God doesn’t**



**change, and yet it does describe things that look like change... For example, when we're talking about God's law, the Bible doesn't indicate that God over time gets a little softer, you know. God doesn't lower his standards, you know. It isn't like he's looked at the human race for thousands of years now and said, "Well, you know, I knew they weren't perfect, but now I see how really imperfect they are, so they don't have to live up to the same standards." Those things never change. What God told Moses on Mount Sinai and what God has revealed throughout the Scriptures, still the same. We are held to the same standard, which would be very frightening if it were not for the fact that the gospel message doesn't change either, that God has always loved his creation and specifically, very purposefully, loved human beings enough that he came into the world to make a difference in our lives, to change it so that we wouldn't be consigned to hell forever but could live with him in heaven forever... God's immutability is a warning to us on the one side and a great comfort to us on the other.**

**— Dr. Jeffery Moore**

When we consider both general revelation and the Scriptures, it's difficult to deny that God transcends his creation in all three of these ways. Creation is finite, but God is infinite. Creation is temporal, but God is eternal. Creation is changeable, but God is unchangeable.

Still, we have to be careful here. Terms like "infinite," "eternal" and "unchangeable" are so abstract that they can be easily misconstrued. For instance, many beginning students of theology go to an extreme. They act as if God's incommunicable attributes form an impenetrable barrier between God and his creation. Despite many rather obvious teachings to the contrary, in both Scripture and systematic theology, some people *only* see God's transcendence. They convince themselves that because God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable, he cannot actually enter into and engage the finite, temporal and changing world.

Many argue, for instance, that because God has infinite knowledge, God never investigates circumstances. But the Scriptures frequently speak to the contrary. For instance, in Genesis 18:20-21, God sent angelic spies to investigate the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Similarly, some people hold that because God is eternal, God never waits to react to human obedience and disobedience. Actually, he does this quite often. For example, Deuteronomy 8:2 tells us that God waited to judge Israel in the exodus until after they had failed their tests of obedience.

In addition, many maintain that because God is unchangeable, God never responds to prayers. But God responds to prayer throughout the Bible. We see this in places like Exodus 32:14. After God stated that he was going to destroy the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, he responded to Moses' prayer and refrained from destroying his people.



So, how do these evangelicals reconcile their views of God's incommunicable attributes with these and similar teachings of Scripture? Unfortunately, all too often they treat biblical references to God's engagements with his creation as mere "appearances." From this point of view, God doesn't actually involve himself with his creation. He only gives us the *impression* that he does. But when we conceive of God's incommunicable attributes in ways that diminish the reality of his involvement with creation, we strike at the heart of biblical faith. What could be more important in Scripture than the fact that God is fully and genuinely engaged with his finite, temporal and changing creation? What could be more important to all of us than the reality that God interacts with us?

To avoid these serious misconceptions we must always consider the full scope of biblical perspectives about God's incommunicable attributes. We've seen how the Scriptures refer to divine transcendence. Now, let's see how they also affirm divine immanence.

## Divine Immanence

On the whole, "divine immanence," refers to the reality of God's involvement with his creation. In fact, the Bible devotes much more time to God's immanent involvement in the world than it does to his transcendence. We see this in the many ways Scripture reports God's historical manifestations. "Historical manifestations" are the ways God involved himself with the unfolding of biblical history. The Scriptures give us many descriptions of God. They reveal a variety of his names and titles; they offer countless metaphors and similes for God; and they report a number of his actions. In some cases, the Scriptures focus on God's historical manifestations in short periods of time. In other cases, they reflect on his historical displays over long periods of time. They deal with God's activities in his heavenly court and on earth. They disclose things about his interactions with the spiritual world and with the physical world; with large groups of people and with smaller groups; with families and even with individuals.

Unfortunately, some well-meaning Christians have misinterpreted the Bible's emphasis on divine immanence. They've viewed God's interactions with his creation as a denial of his divine transcendence. Some of these outlooks are more extreme than others. But, in one way or another, they all stress divine immanence to such a degree that they reject God's incommunicable attributes.

For instance, they conclude that God must be finite because he asks questions, expresses frustration, and doesn't immediately overcome evil. Some theologians have suggested that God is not eternal because he waits to act until after he tests his people, he offers salvation, and he threatens judgment. These same theologians have concluded that God is changeable because God answers prayer, relents, and revises guiding principles. These points of view deny the full reality of divine transcendence in favor of divine immanence.

But to deny that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in these ways is also to strike at the heart of biblical faith. How can we be confident that God's purposes will not fail if God is limited in his power? How are we to be sure that Christ has secured our eternal salvation if God is subject to time? How can we affirm that God's promises are

reliable if God is changeable? As important as it is to affirm the immanence of God — his full engagement in history — we must also affirm what the Scriptures teach about the incommunicable attributes of God.

To understand God's incommunicable attributes, we must hold firmly to the full range of biblical perspectives on God's transcendence *and* his immanence. This isn't easy to do because we quickly reach the limits of our human abilities to penetrate the mysteries of God. As with many other difficult subjects like the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, we come face to face with truths about God that are beyond our grasp. But in the final analysis, the Scriptures call us to embrace both God's transcendence and his immanence. We stand by the full reality of God's incommunicable perfections *and* the full reality of God's engagement with his creation.

Psalm 115:3 succinctly summarizes this biblical point of view when it says:

**Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him (Psalm 115:3).**

Notice how this passage views God's transcendence — the fact that “God is in heaven” — as the basis upon which we may be confident that “he does whatever pleases him” in creation.

As mysterious as it is, God is infinite, but this doesn't mean that he's uninvolved with the finite. From the biblical point of view, it's precisely *because* God is infinite that he can fully enter the realm of the finite as he wishes.

God is eternal, but this doesn't mean that he's outside of time. Rather, his eternity is the reason that he can participate within time in any way he chooses.

God is unchangeable, but this doesn't mean that he's absent from the realm of change. It's precisely *because* God is unchangeable in all of his perfections that he engages his changing creation as he pleases.

As we've seen, we must embrace the full breadth of biblical teachings on God's transcendence *and* immanence if we want to gain a proper understanding of God's incommunicable attributes.

**Theologians speak not only of the transcendence of God, how high and exalted he is, but also about the immanence of God, his closeness and the nearness of his presence. God is intimately involved in what is happening in the world and very close to us. And we see this supremely in Jesus Christ and in his incarnation, where the invisible Son of God became visible in the form of human flesh and actually came into our human situation. I think we also see the immanence of God in the nearness of the presence of God the Holy Spirit... And this is one of the mysteries of the being and character of God. He is both transcendent, far above us, but also so near to us and close to us. He is also immanent.**

**— Dr. Philip Ryken**

As we've considered how God is different from his creation, we've explored the identification of his incommunicable attributes. Now, we're ready to turn to our second

main topic in this lesson: the integration of God's incommunicable attributes with his other perfections.

## INTEGRATION

---

It's been customary for systematic theologians to distinguish God's incommunicable and communicable attributes from each other. But many have questioned how useful this distinction actually is. The Scriptures don't separate these divine attributes into classes. In fact, as we're about to see, biblical authors treated all divine attributes as closely interconnected. So, if we want to know how God is different from his creation, we need to see that he's different from us in all of his attributes. In other words, God is transcendent, beyond compare, not just in some, but in *every facet* of his divine essence.

We'll explore the integration of God's incommunicable attributes with his other perfections in three steps. First, we'll consider the biblical foundation for integrating God's attributes. Second, we'll note the theological variety among evangelicals on these matters. And third, we'll explore the breadth of biblical perspectives necessary to integrate all of God's attributes. Let's begin with the biblical foundation for exploring the integration of God's attributes.

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Integrating God's attributes accords with the longstanding Christian doctrine of the "simplicity of God." God isn't simple in that he's easy to understand. When theologians speak of God's simplicity, they have in mind that God's essence is not a composite; it's not divided. As the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* puts it, God is "without parts". And as the first article of the *Belgic Confession* expresses it, God is "one ... simple and spiritual Being."

**The doctrine of simplicity has been disputed over the centuries. What it does not mean is that God has no personality, no movement, no dynamism, no characteristics. It doesn't mean that he is simple in the sense that he's some sort of platonic being with no attributes. What it means is that he's, if I can put it this way, he's one kind of being. He does not add anything outside of himself to himself. He's not composed. He's not a bunch of parts added together the way some theologians think. So he is, the Bible says, God is a spirit. A spirit by definition is a simple being, not composed, not complex, not polytheistic. And again, this is ultimately a very comforting doctrine to us because it means our God is pure; he is not an amalgam of things that were put into his being or that he composed... So, it's not that he is simplistic or has no interest or intrigue or personality or**

**love or attributes, it is that his being is not an addition of various parts. He is pure Spirit.**

**— Dr. William Edgar**

During the patristic and medieval periods, the influence of Hellenistic philosophies on leading Christian theologians made it easy to affirm the doctrine of God's simplicity. Hellenistic outlooks on God emphasized the absolute unity or oneness of God. And this backdrop led biblical interpreters to be keenly aware of this theme in the Scriptures. But in more recent history, as the influence of Hellenistic philosophy has waned, a number of leading theologians have doubted that the Scriptures teach the simplicity or unity of God's essence. So, it's important to point out the biblical foundation for this doctrine. Moses' well-known words in Deuteronomy 6:4 have often been used to support belief in God's simplicity. There we read:

**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one (Deuteronomy 6:4).**

Modern translators have offered several alternative translations: "The Lord our God is one Lord"; "The Lord is our God, the Lord is one"; or "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

Those who don't see the simplicity of God in this passage argue that it calls for Israel to serve only Yahweh rather than some other god. But, the traditional translation of "the Lord is one" implies the oneness or unity of God himself. Although the Hebrew grammar supports both of these possibilities, there's good reason to think that Moses intended the latter.

We could say many things in favor of the traditional translation, but it will suffice to put it this way: In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses called Israel to be loyal to God and to turn away from all other gods. We know that, at times, the Israelites were tempted to total apostasy by utterly rejecting the Lord and serving the gods of other nations. But more often, the Israelites fell into syncretism and mixed the beliefs and practices of other nations and religions with their own. These other nations referred to their gods, like the Baals, Ashtaroths and other gods, in the plural because they believed that these gods were divided, as it were, among different places. They acknowledged these gods one way in one place and another way in another place.

By contrast, Moses repeatedly taught Israel that God should only be worshipped at the one place that God ordained. Unlike the gods of other nations, God could not be divided into parts between one place and another because "the Lord is one." In this sense then, Deuteronomy 6:4 lays a foundation for the Christian doctrine of the simplicity of God, the fact that God is not divided into parts. In the literal translation of James 2:19, James confirmed this understanding of Deuteronomy 6:4 when he said:

**You believe that God is one; you do well (James 2:19, ESV).**

James did not write, “You believe that *there is one God*,” as some translations put it. He literally wrote, “You believe that God is one.” In this way, James confirmed that Deuteronomy 6:4 teaches the oneness, the unity, the simplicity of God.

The biblical doctrine of divine simplicity has many implications for theology proper. But as we can see here, this doctrine establishes the biblical foundation for exploring the integration of God’s attributes. God’s perfections are not different parts of God. They are all fully unified, interconnected qualities of his one essence.

With this biblical foundation for the integration of God’s attributes in mind, we should turn to a second issue: the theological variety among evangelical approaches to integrating God’s communicable and incommunicable perfections.

## THEOLOGICAL VARIETY

As we saw earlier in this lesson, even though evangelicals have used a variety of terms to sum up the incommunicable attributes of God, there has been a great deal of unity. In many ways, the same kind of thing is true of the integration of God’s incommunicable attributes with his communicable attributes. This integration has been expressed in a number of ways. Yet, to one degree or another, evangelicals, rather consistently, have affirmed the value of integrating these two classes of attributes.

To explore this theological variety among evangelicals, let’s look once again at the three documents we mentioned earlier. First we’ll examine the *Augsburg Confession*. Then we’ll look at the *Belgic Confession*. And third, we’ll spend some time with the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Consider first, the *Augsburg Confession*.

### Augsburg Confession

You’ll recall that the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* refers to God as:

**Eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.**

As we mentioned earlier, the terms eternal, without body, without parts and infinite are frequently associated with God’s incommunicable attributes because he is different from his creation in these ways. The last three terms, power, wisdom, and goodness, are usually identified as communicable attributes because we can share these qualities with God on a creaturely scale.

But notice that the *Confession* doesn’t treat these categories as entirely separate. It doesn’t simply speak of God’s power, wisdom and goodness. Rather, it adds the adjective “infinite” — or *immensus* in Latin. The grammar of the Latin text indicates that God is infinite in his power, infinite in his wisdom, and infinite in his goodness.

In effect, the *Augsburg Confession* looks *through* God’s infinity, through the fact that he is unlimited, and views his power, wisdom and goodness *in the light of his*

*infinity*. And in so doing, the *Confession* acknowledges that God's incommunicable attribute of infinity should be fully integrated with his communicable attributes.

We can see the theological variety in approaches to God's attributes by comparing what we've just seen in the *Augsburg Confession* with the first article of the *Belgic Confession*.

## Belgic Confession

The *Belgic Confession* says that God is:

**Eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, [and] good.**

We mentioned earlier that, more often than not, the terms eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable and infinite are classified as incommunicable attributes. And the last four terms are most commonly associated with God's communicable attributes. But notice that these last four attributes are not listed simply as "mighty, wise, just and good." Although our standard English translations don't make this clear, the original French here uses the phrases "*tout puissant*," meaning "completely or perfectly mighty," and "*tout sage*," meaning "completely or perfectly wise." In addition, the adjective "*tout*" can be extended implicitly to "just" and "good," so that we translate them "*perfectly just*" and "*perfectly good*."

Much like the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Belgic Confession* looks *through* the fact that God is infinite and views his might, wisdom, justice and goodness in the light of his infinity. Although the *Belgic Confession* doesn't use exactly the same words or the same divisions as the *Augsburg Confession*, we can see the similarities.

Keeping in mind the theological variety that we've seen in the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Belgic Confession*, let's turn to the much more extensive pursuit of integration that appears in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

## Westminster Shorter Catechism

As you'll recall, the answer to Question 4 of *Westminster* begins with the statement that:

**God is a Spirit**

It then lists three incommunicable attributes of God as Spirit:

**infinite, eternal and unchangeable**

But rather than allowing us to think of these incommunicable perfections in isolation, *Westminster* explains that all three of them are true of God:

**in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.**

The *Westminster Catechism*'s strategy for integrating God's attributes offers many advantages. To begin with, it uses three broad categories to summarize God's incommunicable attributes. How is God different from his creation? He is "infinite, eternal and unchangeable." Then the *Catechism* answers the question of how God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable by looking *through* these three windows, or attributes, to his communicable attributes. God is infinite "in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." God is eternal "in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." God is unchangeable "in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." In effect, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* provides a systematic way of exploring the full integration of God's incommunicable attributes with his communicable perfections.

Now that we've looked at the integration of God's incommunicable attributes with his other attributes by considering the biblical foundation and the theological variety among evangelicals in this area, let's explore the value of taking into account the breadth of biblical perspectives on these matters.

## **BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Everything we've said in this lesson has been designed to help us answer the question, "How is God different from his creation?" And as we've suggested, God is different from his creation in *all* of his perfections. The Scriptures point us in this direction in so many ways that we can only touch on a few of these biblical perspectives. But the heart of the matter is this: When we consider the full range of what the Bible teaches, it becomes increasingly clear that *all* of God's attributes, not just some, are incommunicable.

We'll illustrate what we have in mind by following the strategy of the fourth question and answer in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. As we mentioned earlier, the *Catechism* systematizes these matters by noting that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in *each* of the communicable attributes it identifies.

To see the breadth of biblical perspectives on integrating God's attributes, we'll consider all seven communicable attributes listed in the *Catechism*, starting with the being, or the existence, of God.

### **Being**

In many respects, God's being or existence is an attribute that is communicable, or shared with God's creation. We know that everything that God has created, including human beings, actually exists. But we fail to grasp the glory of God's existence if we don't acknowledge a fundamental difference between God's being and our own. Our



being is finite, temporal and changeable, and God's being is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

In traditional systematic theology the difference between God's being and creation has often been highlighted in two main ways. Systematic theologians have referred to God's "immensity" and his "omnipresence."

On the one side, the immensity of God is his infinite, eternal and unchangeable existence beyond creation. In 1 Kings 8:27, when Solomon dedicated the temple, he affirmed a grand theological presupposition that underlies everything in Scripture. He said, "The highest heaven, cannot contain [God]." God is different from his creation in that his existence is in no way limited to the realm of his creation. He existed before there was a creation, he exists without limits currently, and he will continue to exist beyond all of creation forever.

On the other side, the omnipresence of God can be defined as his existence everywhere within creation. Systematic theologians point out that unlike any facet of the finite, time-bound, changeable creation, God's being is in all places. As God put it in Jeremiah 23:24, "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" Belief in the omnipresence of God is so basic to biblical faith that in Acts 17:28 Paul agreed with Greek poets that, "In [God] we live and move and have our being." A number of other passages, like Psalm 139:7-10; Isaiah 66:1; and Acts 7:48-49, also touch on the omnipresence of God.

**The one classic passage on which the doctrine of God's omnipresence is built ... is Acts 17:24-28 in which Paul is speaking at Athens and is amazed that God is able to reach even these pagan Gentiles. And so, as part of what he says to explain, God's not just the God of the Jews; God is the God of all people everywhere, earth-wide. He then launches into kind of universe-wide, cosmic-wide. And along the way he makes this comment about God: God is never far from any one of us, pagan or Jewish believer... In fact, he's the God in whom we live and move and have our being. That is, he's everywhere... The other passage to fuse and synthesize Acts 17:24-28 with is Jeremiah 23:23-24 in which the point in that passage is you can't get away from God. There's no place to hide. You know, you can run but you can't hide. And part of what Jeremiah says is because God fills the whole earth.**

— Dr. R. Todd Mangum

In addition to God's being, the *Shorter Catechism* also affirms that God's wisdom is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

## Wisdom

In many respects, wisdom is a communicable attribute of God shared by God's rational creatures. But whatever measure of wisdom we possess, Scripture and general revelation make it clear that our wisdom is limited, temporal and changeable. So, one of



the ways God is different from his creation is that his wisdom is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

Traditional systematic theologians typically stress the incommunicable dimensions of God's wisdom by referring to God's omniscience and his incomprehensibility.

The omniscience of God is the fact that God possesses knowledge of all things. Job 37:16 refers to God's "perfect knowledge." Hebrews 4:13 says that "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight." And Psalm 33:15 says that "[God] considers" — or understands — "everything [people] do." Many other passages illustrate the omniscience of God by pointing out things that God knows that we do not. For instance, in Jeremiah 23:24, God asked, "Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?"

The incommunicable character of God's wisdom is also emphasized in the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. This terminology doesn't imply that we can't know anything of the mind of God. On the contrary, we know portions of his thoughts as he reveals them to us. But God's wisdom is incommunicable in the sense that God's thoughts cannot be fully known. As Paul said in Romans 11:33, God's judgments and paths are "unsearchable ... beyond tracing out." Job 11:7 declares that we cannot "fathom the mysteries of God." Psalm 139:6 declares, "[God's] knowledge is too wonderful ... to attain." Similar passages like 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 139:1-4; and Jeremiah 17:10 also indicate that one of the ways God is different from his creation is that, unlike us, his wisdom is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

**The wisdom of God are the transcendent thoughts, the thoughts that belong to God, that reside with God, that he wants to share with us. And the truth is, when we're thinking in terms of transcendent, that's the kind of life he wants us to live. But it's beyond us. It's only by God's grace do we have an opportunity to attain to that kind of level of living... We need these transcendent thoughts of God, and then, of course, his Holy Spirit to come live in us so we can not only live that way, think that way, and then articulate to others, "this is the way of wisdom."**

— Dr. Matt Friedman

In the third place, God is not only infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being and wisdom, but also in his power.

## **Power**

Both the Scriptures and general revelation indicate that, in many respects, God's power is a communicable attribute because power is a quality that creation shares. But even the greatest powers in creation are limited, temporal and changeable. So, the Scriptures clearly teach the ways that God's power is incommunicable.

This contrast between God's power and creation is most often expressed in systematic theology in terms of God's "omnipotence" and God's "sovereignty."

On the one side, when we speak of the omnipotence of God, we mean that God is all-powerful. For example, in Job 42:2, Job exclaimed, "you can do all things." Psalm 115:3 says that "[God] does whatever pleases him." Jeremiah 32:17 praises God by saying "nothing is too hard for you." And in Matthew 19:26 Jesus reassured his disciples that "with God all things are possible."

Now, we must be sure to add one important qualification here: God's power is always true to his other attributes. He cannot do things that are contrary to the other perfections of his essence. For instance, the Scriptures explicitly declare some things that God cannot do. We learn that God cannot lie, sin, change, nor deny himself in passages like Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; 2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 6:18; and James 1:13, 17. If we keep this qualification in mind, we can be assured that God is omnipotent in the sense that his power is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

**The passages in the Bible that seem to indicate that there are some things that God cannot do are really not really talking about the real meaning of God's omnipotence... He can only do that which is consistent with his nature. It would be totally inconsistent with his divine nature to lie. So there are some things that God cannot do, but it's totally within the realm of his nature.**

— Rev. Clete Hux

On the other side, systematic theologians refer to the infinite, eternal and unchangeable character of God's power as the "sovereignty of God." Simply put, God's sovereignty is his absolute control over creation.

Now, different branches of the church have disagreed over precisely how God exercises his sovereign control over creation. And we'll discuss these issues in a later lesson. But at this point, we should simply note that the Scriptures teach that God has infinite, eternal and unchangeable power to control everything. As King Jehoshaphat declared in 2 Chronicles 20:6, "Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you." Or as Job put it in 42:2, "no purpose of yours can be thwarted." In Daniel 4:35, even King Nebuchadnezzar admitted that God "does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth." According to Ephesians 1:11, God's sovereignty is so extensive that he "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." And Romans 8:28 assures us of God's sovereignty even during times of great trials because "in all things God works for the good of those who love him." These and countless other passages clearly indicate that God's sovereignty is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

In addition to its treatment of God's being, wisdom and power, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* also points out that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his holiness.

## Holiness

In many respects, holiness is a communicable attribute of God because it's shared by some facets of creation. The Scriptures frequently refer to locations, objects, spirits and people as holy. And the biblical adjectives that we usually translate as “holy,” “sacred” or “sanctified” — *qadosh* (קֹדֶשׁ) in Hebrew, and *hagios* (ἅγιος) in Greek — simply mean, “separate” or “set apart.” But both general revelation and the Scriptures make it clear that the holiness of creatures is finite, temporal and changeable, while God's holiness is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

In systematics, theologians most often approach the incommunicable qualities of God's holiness by calling attention to God's moral holiness. They also highlight what may be called his majestic holiness.

On the one side, the moral holiness of God refers to the fact that he is separate from all evil. As Psalm 92:15 puts it, “there is no wickedness in him.” And Habakkuk 1:12-13 exclaims, “Holy One . . . Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.” God's moral purity is so basic to biblical faith that James wrote confidently in James 1:13, “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.”

On the other side, the Scriptures also point to what has been called the majestic holiness of God. This terminology indicates that God is separate from all creation, including his morally pure creatures.

**The difference between God's moral holiness and his ontological holiness, or majestic holiness, as we might say, goes back to the old idea of what the word “holy” means, and it essentially means, “set apart from.” And there's two things that God is set apart from. First of all, he is set apart from sinners. He's pure; he never sins; he is perfectly righteous, and so he's set apart from sinners in that regard — morally perfect, pure, *holy*, in that sense. But there's a second sense in which God is also holy. That is, he's higher than us; he's different than us; he's of a different nature and ontological status — a higher being — and in that respect is holy as well. His ways and his thoughts are far above ours. So, God is holy, that is, set apart, in his being and in the righteousness of his character.**

— Rev. Dan Hendley

God's majestic holiness is most vividly illustrated in Isaiah 6:3 where seraphim cry out:

**Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty (Isaiah 6:3).**

In this passage, seraphim, morally pure creatures who serve before the throne of God, acknowledge that God is to be worshipped as thrice holy, utterly supreme in his holiness. Similar expressions of God's majestic holiness appear in passages like Exodus 15:11; 1 Samuel 2:2; Isaiah 57:15; and Hosea 11:9.

Not only is God infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being wisdom, power and holiness, these incommunicable qualities also characterize his justice.

## Justice

In many respects, both general and special revelation indicate that justice is a communicable attribute because moral creatures, especially human beings, can be just and righteous. The concept of God's justice is often expressed by the family of Hebrew terms associated with the word *tsaddiq* (צַדִּיק), and with the family of Greek terms associated with the term *dikaionuné* (δικαιοσύνη). We normally translate these terms "righteousness" or "justice." But while human righteousness and justice are limited, temporal and changing, God's righteousness or justice is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

The attribute of God's justice is most often associated in Scripture with the judgments of his heavenly court. As 1 Peter 1:17 reads, we have a Father who "judges each person's work impartially." According to Romans 2:5-6, in "righteous judgment ... God will repay each person according to what they have done." And because God's judgments are always true, in Romans 9:14, Paul asked, "Is God unjust?" And his reply was firm, "Not at all!" Moses declared, in Deuteronomy 32:4, "All his ways are just ... upright and just is he." So, it's no wonder that in John 17:25, Jesus called his heavenly Father, "Righteous" — or just — "Father."

Systematic theologians have drawn attention to the justice of God by focusing on two main areas: God's just rewards and his just punishments.

On the one side, God's nature is to grant just rewards for righteousness. As Psalm 58:11 puts it, "the righteous still are rewarded [because] ... there is a God who judges the earth." And Paul referred to the righteousness that comes to all who are justified in Christ when, in 2 Timothy 4:8, he spoke of "the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award ... to all who have longed for his appearing." It may seem at times as if there is no reward for righteousness. But, we can be assured of God's just rewards because God remains infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his justice.

On the other side, it's God's nature to grant just punishments for evil. In 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8, Paul insisted that "God is just ... He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." And in Acts 17:31 Paul called for repentance because "[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed." In fact, the just punishment of God against sin was a pillar of biblical faith. As Paul explained in Romans 3:26, God is both "just and the one who justifies" because Christ's atonement met the requirement of justice on behalf of all who believe. These and many other passages draw attention to how God's infinite, eternal and unchangeable justice is displayed in his just punishments.

Following God's being wisdom, power, holiness and justice, the *Shorter Catechism* refers to the goodness of God.

## Goodness

In many respects, goodness is a communicable attribute because the Scriptures often refer to creation as good. In Genesis 1:31, God looked at his creation and said it was “very good.” And Paul reaffirmed this divine declaration in 1 Timothy 4:4. In general terms, *tov* (טוב) in Hebrew and *agathos* (ἀγαθός) in Greek signify the approval of someone or something. So, many facets of creation can be rightly described as “good.” Of course, the goodness of creation is limited, temporal and changeable. But, by contrast, the goodness of God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

When the Scriptures say that God is “good,” they mean that he is infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably deserving of approval. Now, in saying this, we must be quick to add that there is no measure of goodness that God must meet outside of himself. God is the very definition of good. As the first article of the *Belgic Confession* puts it, God is “good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.”

In systematic theology, God’s goodness is closely associated with a number of familiar biblical teachings. But it helps to think in terms of two main categories: the direct goodness of God and the indirect goodness of God.

On the one hand, when we speak of the direct goodness of God we have in mind God’s goodness shown in things like his benevolence, mercy, love and patience toward his creatures. For instance, Psalm 34:8 speaks of God’s benevolence as the proof of his goodness when it says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” God’s goodness is associated with his mercy and compassion in Exodus 33:19 where God said to Moses, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Psalm 25:7 speaks of God’s love flowing from his goodness when it says, “according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good.”

Other passages such as Psalm 23:6; Psalm 73:1; Psalm 145:9, 15-16; and Mark 10:18 also point in a variety of ways to God’s goodness. But the most direct display of the infinite, eternal and unchangeable goodness of God is his eternal love for Christ and for all those who are in Christ. As Paul put it in Ephesians 1:4-6:

**In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will — to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves (Ephesians 1:4-6).**

As the larger context of this verse makes clear, our adoption to sonship was in love, the love of God for us from before the creation. And God’s eternal love for his people is in Christ, in the One he loves. The love of God for those who are in Christ is rooted in the infinite, eternal and unchanging love of the Father for his Son.

**The Bible tells us much about God's love for us. God loves us in many ways, and he shows us his love for us in many ways. However, the Bible is clear that God definitively and ultimately shows his love for us in the way that he sends his only Son to us. John 3:16 says, “God so**

loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” God’s love is most supremely demonstrated then in the giving of his Son to the world in order to save the world. But we must not stop there because God’s love is demonstrated in what he gave his Son to do for us. His Son came in order to be a sacrifice for our sins. In fact, we are not the ones who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins... So, this should bring great encouragement to us. In fact, Paul picks up on this point in Romans 8 and encourages us with these words, he says, “If God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things?” And so, God has definitively and ultimately and climactically shown us the way he loves us in the giving of his Son. We should therefore trust him and be assured that he really does love us.

— Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

On the other hand, Scripture also draws attention to the infinite, eternal and unchangeable character of God’s goodness by focusing on God’s indirect goodness. Here we have in mind the assurance that God will bring about good even through troubles and trials that temporarily plague his creation. One of the greatest challenges to belief in God’s goodness is the presence of evil in his creation. But biblical authors insisted that the perfection of God’s goodness will cause good to result from evil. For example, James 1:17 tells us that difficult trials are for our good because, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” And as Paul assured the Roman Christians in Romans 8:28, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”

After touching on the biblical perspectives associated with God’s being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice and goodness, we come now to the truth of God. This is the last of the communicable attributes mentioned in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

## Truth

Both the Bible and general revelation make it clear that, in many respects, truth is a communicable attribute. God’s rational and moral creatures can be true, honest, reliable and faithful. The concept of God’s truth derives from the family of Hebrew terms associated with the verb *aman* (אמן), often translated “to be sure,” “confirmed” or “true,” and from the well-known term *chesed* (חֶסֶד) often translated “faithfulness” or “lovingkindness.” This concept also comes from the New Testament Greek terms associated with *alétheia* (ἀλήθεια) and *pistis* (πίστις). These biblical terms signify veracity, truthfulness reliability and faithfulness. God’s creatures can exhibit these qualities, but only in finite, temporal and changing ways. By contrast, the truth of God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. Paul reflected on the incomparable quality of God’s truth in Romans 3:4 when he said:



**Let God be true, and every human being a liar (Romans 3:4).**

By and large, systematic theologians have highlighted this attribute of God in two main ways. God is the faithful source of truth, and he is faithful to his promises.

On the one side, God is extolled as the faithful source of truth. In Psalm 119:43, the Psalmist spoke of the Scriptures as God's "word of truth." In this same Psalm in verse 142, he confidently declared, "Your law is true." Psalm 25:5 is a prayer for God to "Guide me in your truth and teach me." In John 8:32, Jesus explained to his disciples that if they held to his teaching then they would "know the truth, and the truth [would] set [them] free." In John 16:13, Christ promised his apostles that "the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth." And in John 17:17, Jesus prayed to the Father, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." In these and other ways, the Scriptures make it clear that when God discloses truth, it is fully reliable because it is his very nature to be faithful and true.

On the other side, God is also infinitely, eternally and unchangeably truthful or faithful to his promises. God can be relied upon to fulfill all of his promises. Now, we have to be careful here. Many times in Scripture what may *appear* to be a promise from God is actually an offer or a threat from God with implicit conditions. If the implicit conditions aren't met, God's offer or threat is not fulfilled. But as Paul wrote in Titus 1:2, "God ... does not lie." If God makes a promise, he will fulfill it. Numbers 23:19; Psalm 33:4; Hebrews 6:18 and many other passages point to God's faithful fulfillment of all promises. It's no surprise, then, that Revelation 3:14 introduces the exalted Christ as, "the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation."

We've only touched on a few of the many things that could be said about this facet of the doctrine of God. But the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* gives us glimpses into the breadth of biblical perspectives we must consider as we learn about God's incommunicable perfections. As we've seen, the Scriptures don't present God as infinite, eternal and unchangeable in just *some* ways, but in *every* way. Every facet of his essence is beyond compare. And in this sense, *every* attribute of God is an incommunicable attribute.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

In this lesson, we've explored how God is different from his creation in two main ways. First, we studied the identification of God's incommunicable attributes. We looked at the biblical foundation for identifying his perfections, the theological variety among evangelicals in this area, and the breadth of biblical perspectives needed to identify these attributes. We also examined the integration of God's incommunicable attributes with all of God's other perfections by considering the biblical foundation, the theological variety among evangelicals, and the range of biblical perspectives we must consider as we pursue these processes.

All too often, followers of Christ don't recognize the importance of thinking carefully about the incommunicable attributes of God. But our beliefs about the ways

God is different from his creation are so vital to the Christian faith that they impact all of our doctrines, practices and attitudes. Many pillars of Christian doctrine rest on a proper understanding of God's incommunicable perfections. Our daily activities are guided by these truths as well. And our attitudes of humility, confidence, joy and worship before God are deeply influenced by what we believe about this facet of theology proper. Understanding what the Scriptures teach about the incommunicable attributes of God equips us for every dimension of faithful service in Christ.



---

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams (Host)** is Associate Pastor at Grace and Peace Fellowship in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Williams earned his M.Div. at Chesapeake Theological Seminary and his D.Min. at Covenant Theological Seminary. Before joining Grace and Peace Fellowship, Dr. Williams was Senior Pastor of New Song Community Church in Baltimore, MD. He also served as Minister of Outreach and Youth at Faith Christian Fellowship Church and was Co-Area Director with Young Life.

---

**Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.** is Associate Professor of Theology and Director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College & Graduate School.

**Dr. Brandon D. Crowe** is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary.

**Dr. William Edgar** is Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman** is Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

**Rev. Dan Hendley** is Senior Pastor of North Park Church in Wexford, PA.

**Rev. Clete Hux** is Director and Counter-Cult Apologist at Apologetics Resource Center in Birmingham, AL.

**Dr. Richard Lints** is Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum** is Professor of Theology and Academic Dean at Biblical Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Josh Moody** is Senior Pastor at College Church in Wheaton, IL.

**Dr. Jeffery Moore** served at Trinity Downtown Orlando as Senior Pastor from 2003 to 2014.

**Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe** is Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Seminary.

**Dr. Philip Ryken** is President of Wheaton College.

**Dr. Tim Sansbury** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theology and Vice President of Administration at Knox Theological Seminary.

# We Believe in God

LESSON  
TWO

## How God Is Different Faculty Forum



Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, study guides and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### **ABOUT THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES**

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Third Millennium has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Third Millennium Ministries is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org)

# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b> Why should we distinguish between God’s communicable and incommunicable attributes? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b> What do the Scriptures tell us about God’s spirituality? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b> What do theologians mean by God’s simplicity? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b> What is God’s omniscience?.....	5
<b>Question 5:</b> What do theologians mean by God’s aseity or self-existence?.....	6
<b>Question 6:</b> What does God’s aseity, or self-existence, teach us about his independence from his creation? .....	7
<b>Question 7:</b> What is God’s infinity? .....	8
<b>Question 8:</b> What does it mean to say that God is eternal? .....	9
<b>Question 9:</b> What is God’s immutability? .....	10
<b>Question 10:</b> How can God be immutable if the Bible says that he sometimes changes his mind? .....	12
<b>Question 11:</b> What does it mean that God is omnipresent? .....	15
<b>Question 12:</b> What does omnipotence mean? .....	16
<b>Question 13:</b> How do you interpret the passages of the Bible that tell us that there are some things God cannot do? .....	18
<b>Question 14:</b> Where is God’s love best demonstrated?.....	20

# **We Believe in God**

## **Lesson Two: How God Is Different**

### **Faculty Forum**

With

Dr. Don Collett  
Rev. Peter Cui  
Dr. William Edgar  
Rev. Dan Hendley  
Rev. Clete Hux  
Dr. Glenn R. Kreider  
Dr. Richard Lints  
Dr. Robert G. Lister  
Dr. R. Todd Mangum  
Dr. Scott Manor

Dr. Josh Moody  
Dr. Jeffery Moore  
Dr. Miguel Nuñez  
Rev. Vernon Pierre  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.  
Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe  
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III  
Dr. Ramesh Richard  
Prof. Brandon P. Robbins  
Dr. Steven C. Roy

Dr. Philip Ryken  
Dr. Tim Sansbury  
Dr. Glen G. Scorgie  
Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry  
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes  
Dr. Carl R. Trueman  
Dr. Simon Vibert  
Dr. Carey Vinzant  
Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler  
Rev. Valery Zadorozhny

### **Question 1:**

**Why should we distinguish between God's communicable and incommunicable attributes?**

#### **Dr. Harry L. Reeder III**

Well, I think it's very important to understand what are the communicable attributes of God and what are the incommunicable attributes of God. The communicable attributes of God are those attributes of God which are reflected in us who are made in his image and are restored progressively by God's work of grace through his saving work in our life. So that, for instance, God is holy in the sense of purity. Well, he made us holy, and though sin has marred us, when we come to Christ, he now begins to rebuild that as we pursue holiness, "without which no man shall see the Lord" — by his grace, for his glory, but we actually engage in the pursuit of holiness... But now, there are some attributes that are not communicated to us... So, when we say that God is holy, what we mean is God is unique; he is one of a kind. The incommunicable attributes are those attributes that declare his uniqueness... There is none like him. And that uniqueness of God is declared through his incommunicable attributes. No matter how much I am like Jesus, I will never be Jesus. No matter how much I can reflect God's glory, I will never be the full owner of God's glory. I have a measure of his glory. The only one who has the glory of God without measure, that is the outshining of all of his attributes, is Jesus: "And the Word became flesh ... and we beheld His glory, the glory ... of the only begotten [from] the Father, full of grace and truth." I have a measure of his glory. I do not have the fullness of it, but I can give glory to him who alone is God.

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

There are lots of systematic theologians that think that the distinction between the incommunicable and communicable attributes just shouldn't be made. And that's especially true in recent decades. And there are lots of good reasons that they bring up that lead to that conclusion. I think probably the most important one is that when you look at the Bible, the Bible doesn't make that distinction explicitly in the Scriptures; it just does not appear. And even more than that, when you start talking about them in theology, you always have to come back and say, well, they're not separate from each other; they're not distinct from each other, that when we say God is infinite and eternal and unchangeable and things like that — his incommunicable attributes, the ones that he doesn't share with us — then you realize, well, that doesn't say very much about him unless you connect it to things are his communicable attributes, the ways in which he is like his creation. So, he's infinite in his holiness, or he's eternal in his goodness, or that kind of thing. So, you can see that for those reasons it makes sense that people would not want to make that distinction in systematic theology anymore.

But there are some values to making that distinction that I think that sometimes we may overlook. When you think about the incommunicable attributes, the ways in which God is different from his creation and doesn't share his qualities with creation, what it does is, it exalts God. It makes it clear how magnificent he is, how supreme he is. And so we praise him and we honor him in those ways. And the other thing that it does is that it humbles us because, as creatures, we simply cannot be like God in those ways. We can't even begin to imitate him. We can't, and in fact the Scriptures never call on us to try to be infinite. They never call on us to try to be eternal. They never call on us to try to be unchangeable because that's just simply impossible. And so the motif of trying to be like God does not apply to the *incommunicable* attributes.

But now, if you flip it over and think about the communicable attributes, there we find that there's value in identifying those as well as a separate or different sort of class of attributes of God. For example, they tell us that, yes, God is like creation, but he is still far superior. He is immanent; his immanence over us is still emphasized because, well, yeah, God is holy and we're to be holy, but his holiness is far beyond compare with ours. And so, even the ways in which we are like God, he's still our supreme Creator. But even more than that, the most important reason, in my opinion, for identifying those communicable attributes is that the *imago Dei*, "the image of God," is connected to the theme of *imitatio Dei*, "the imitation of God." So, the image of God is to be *like* God. So, how is the image of God to be like God? How is that a moral consideration or a moral obligation for all of us? Well, it's true; it is our obligation in terms of his communicable attributes. Things like his goodness. Well, God is good and we are to be good. God is wise; we are to be wise. In fact, we're to have the wisdom that comes from God. God is powerful; we are to exercise power as he tells us. God is holy. We're supposed to be holy like him: "Be holy because I am holy." God is true. God is truth. God is faithfulness. And we're to be truthful; we're to be faithful. So, there are these practical benefits to believers if they do make those

distinctions between the incommunicable attributes and the communicable attributes of God.

**Dr. Tim Sansbury**

So, Scripture teaches us that humans have been created in the image of God. Scripture teaches us that God's nature and his being is reflected in his creation. And so, when we do the work of systematic theology, talking about the communicable and the incommunicable attributes of God is helpful in trying to understand, even though those distinctions themselves are not directly out of Scripture, it helps us to understand some of the things that are in Scripture that we're going to try to understand... As we try to learn from Scripture about what Scripture does teach, things like how God is reflected in his creation. What does it mean to be in the image of God? How is this creation of man different than the creation of the animals, so to speak? And then also, as our sin wants to reach up and make us into gods, in what ways are we the image of God but not ourselves gods? In those conversations and those discussions, talking about the communicable attributes of God and the incommunicable attributes of God, even though that language doesn't come out of Scripture itself, it helps us to be able to understand what has God transferred, so to speak? What has God given to the world — such as just *being* itself — that everything in the world has, but that it has only because God had it first, but that God is able to transfer? And yet, what does it not have? Well, it doesn't have the ability to exist all by itself without needing a Creator. It doesn't have this sort of eternity of existence. And so, having those distinctions, in what ways has God communicated to these things that he's made, aspects of who he is that help us to understand what's meant in Scripture, is very, very helpful. But trying to make those terms themselves into hard and fast, "and this is where the border stops and this is where it starts on these different ideas," they don't come directly out of Scripture, and so Scripture does not define in and of itself the distinctions. So, they're helpful for learning, but they are not in and of themselves the objects that we should be seeking to learn about.

**Question 2:**

**What do the Scriptures tell us about God's spirituality?**

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider**

In John 4, I think it's verse 24, Jesus says that God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. That God is "spiritual" is a way of expressing that God is not material: God is other than the world that he has created, and that the relationship between us and God is rooted in the Spirit of God, the third person of the Godhead. And so, that God is spiritual means, I think, a little more than simply that God is immaterial, that God is ethereal, but that God is experienced and God is known by means of the Spirit.

**Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

When it comes to God's spirituality, the Scriptures tell us various things. First of all, at the most basic level, God is a spirit. That means, for example, that he's invisible. Even though God manifests himself sometimes visibly in Scripture and of course supremely through the flesh of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, God in himself is invisible. No man has seen him; no man can see him. Secondly, it tells us that God is not confined by the usual parameters that embodied creatures would be confined by. God is omnipresent; God can be everywhere. God sustains the whole universe by his Spirit, so it tells us it connects to our understanding of God's attributes, that God is without limit.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

The Bible says God is spirit, which means he's not made of matter in his essence. He is spiritual in that sense, which is why it's especially amazing to think that in the incarnation, where God became a man, he took on humanity. So, to say God is spiritual affirms that about him, but it doesn't then make us think negatively about the physical realm, because in the incarnation we have a radical affirmation of the physical realm because God takes it to himself in his Son.

**Question 3:****What do theologians mean by God's simplicity?****Prof. Brandon P. Robbins**

Theologians often talk of the simplicity of God, meaning that God is not complex. God is not made up of parts. Because we are finite creatures, we can only, kind of, talk about one thing at a time, so we have to use different terms, sometimes, to describe God. We have to say that he is all-powerful, and he is all-knowing. We've got to say he has different attributes, like God is love, and God is merciful, and God is just. But when we say he's "simple" that means — in a way that we almost can't even conceive — he is one at the same time. His righteousness is his mercy; you know, his justice is his grace. He is completely simple and is not made up of individual parts like we are. He does not have hands and feet and eyes and those kinds of things that have different sections of him. He is a simple being.

**Rev. Valery Zadorozhny, translation**

God's simplicity is a very interesting notion because, on the one hand, the Bible says that God is inconceivable. That is, a man cannot analyze him and sort him out. And on the other hand, theology contains the concept of God's "simplicity." And, as we know, we may say that God has revealed himself as Trinity, but these three persons are one; they have one essence. That is, he cannot be broken down into what we'd call "parts." If we take any created thing, it necessarily consists of parts. A solution consists of water and something else; there are many molecules in it. And God is one. So, in this sense, he is simple.



**Dr. Jeffery Moore**

Theology sometimes talks about God as “simple.” And when you hear that not from a technical background, you think, “Oh no, God's very complicated.” There is so much going on there; he's so big and all of that. But, to talk about God as “simple” is to talk about him as not being divisible. You can't separate him out into this part, this part, or this part. God is absolutely, wholly, completely integrated so that you can't... You know, I have arms and legs and I would still be me if I were to lose a finger or something like that... God's just not like that. He cannot be divided.

**Question 4:**  
**What is God's omniscience?****Dr. Richard Lints**

God's omniscience is a way of speaking of God's knowledge. He has *all* knowledge. Now, when we say that, again there is some mystery involved. At a formal level, we might say for every true proposition, God knows, and knows that it's true. But at a more experiential level, we also want to say that God *understands* everything, that there is no mystery in God's knowledge of all that is, including God's knowledge of himself. Most of us live on this side of that infinity. We are limited in our knowledge. We are limited in our understanding. We bump into that reality all the time, especially the more complex our world has become in its technology, in its urban developments, in ordinary experience, we bump into how limited our understanding is. And to affirm God's omniscience is to affirm God has no such limits. God knows everything.

**Dr. William Edgar**

The word omniscience basically means, “knowing everything.” It doesn't just mean knowing quantitatively everything. It means knowing personally and determinatively everything. The reason God knows everything is because he determines everything. Now, this doctrine is a very precious one for us because we don't know everything. We know partially; we know through a glass darkly, but we have One in the universe who does know everything. And this means that God doesn't have to think a problem through. You know, if you enjoy things like crossword puzzles or heuristic games, you love just pondering, “now, what's the letter that belongs here, and what is that word?” God doesn't do that. He has an instant omniscience, an instant knowledge of everything. His knowledge, as Van Til used to say, is coterminous with his being. His knowledge and his being are coterminous. In other words, it's two different ways of saying the same thing. We can't say that of human beings. We know, but we know through a process, and our being doesn't determine what we know outside of a relationship with God who reveals himself to us. So, this fact that God knows everything is one more way to show his utter distinction from the creature, his holiness, the wonder of his being, and it is a comfort to know that, whereas, we can't figure out what's going on sometimes, and we suffer and we don't understand why, he knows... His omniscience is a comfort. When we get to the other side, I imagine God will explain things to us about things that were mysteries here, and he will gently

chide us by saying, “Didn’t you forget that I was omniscient and that I might have had a good reason for doing these things?”

### **Dr. Jeffery Moore**

Using the term “omniscience” is an attempt by humans to be able to put a category on the idea that God knows everything. But as soon as we say the word or try to define the word, we’re thinking in terms of “I know a lot of stuff, and if I knew even more stuff, that would be more like God, and if I knew all the stuff, then that would be like God”... I guess the word omniscience, like all theological terms that talk about the nature, the character of God, is very presumptive. It’s an attempt on our part to give a name to something that is so big, like God’s eternity or God’s infinity, something that’s so big and maybe it makes us a little more comfortable to have a name for it. And also, it helps us to remember the distance between us and God. In every circumstance I can say I don’t know everything about this, but what I know about this leads me to believe, or leads me to act in this way. None of those restrictions apply to God. He does know everything. He knows where every electron is in its orbit around every nucleus of every atom of every molecule of every cell of every thing that is not only on this earth and living and breathing, but the inanimate things and all of the stars and all of the planets and all of the universes, and all of the things we don’t even know exist so that we would know to look for them or where to look for them. People talk about “dark matter” and these, you know, this energy that can’t be seen and all of those things. None of that is missing from God’s database. He knows all of those things. And to contemplate how much he knows compared to how little I know, we have a term, omniscience, but it’s awfully small for such a big task.

## **Question 5:**

### **What do theologians mean by God’s aseity or self-existence?**

#### **Rev. Vernon Pierre**

God’s aseity sounds like a complex word that really just says something very simple but important. It speaks to God’s self-sufficiency, his independence, that he doesn’t need anything from creation, that he wasn’t lonely when he made creation. It speaks to God being sufficient in and of himself. And Acts 17:24-25 says:

**God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24-25, ESV).**

And it’s an important concept. Many of the other gods in that day, they needed people; they needed people to feed them and to pay attention to them. This says something about the God of the Bible, that God is consistent in and of himself, he’s independent in and of himself. He creates us for his own glory out of his own good will.

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum**

Well, God's self-existence has to do with one area in which God is completely different from any other entity in the universe. Every other entity in the universe is a creation of God. Every other entity in the universe, animate or inanimate, living or substance, material, is a byproduct of a Creator. Often critics of Christianity will say, "Alright, you criticize us, Christians, for thinking that the universe spontaneously combusted out of a big bang, but okay, you have the same problem. You say all of creation was created by a God, but who created that God?" The principle of God's self-existence is a response to that line of questions... When you fuse that together with Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, the creation account, we know where everything else came from, but "In the beginning God." Well, what about before the beginning? There was God. There has always been God, because God is self-existent.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry**

When theologians describe God as self-existent, they mean that he doesn't get his existence from somewhere else. God gives us existence and we've got used to the dependence on God for our existence. But God is not in that same position. God exists because God exists, and he wasn't created by another God. God exists because God exists, and the rest of us exist because God willed it to be.

**Question 6:**

**What does God's aseity, or self-existence, teach us about his independence from his creation?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

When theologians talk about God being self-existent, they're pointing to the fact that God is dependent on no one or nothing else in order to be sustained. God eternally was, God is, in his own being, self-existent. Augustine wrestled with this, of course, and he looked at the Trinity as being a great model of how within the Trinity — the Father, loving, and the Son, beloved, and the Holy Spirit who helps communicate the love between them — even within the Godhead itself there is love perfectly given and expressed. So, God has no need of the creation in order to sustain himself.

**Dr. William Edgar**

God is self-existent in the sense that he depends on no one outside of himself, no thing outside of himself. He is utterly self-sufficient, self-dependent, and has existed forever, whereas we are dependent on God for our existence. Our every breath depends on his generosity and his providence. That's true of the whole creation. The animals, the plants, everything depends on God. And the reason God's self-sufficiency is precious to us is that we don't have a God who in some way is dependent on us for existence. There are people, for example, who say the reason God made us is because he was lonely, and we would answer to that, God didn't have to make us. He wasn't lonely. He already had fellowship within himself because of

the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit existing in love, in honor and glory and communication forever. So, he's independent, self-sufficient, and we are not. It doesn't mean we are insignificant. It doesn't mean that he hasn't given us a call in life and a purpose and the ability to converse with him. These are all very real things. But the bottom line is that we can only do those things because we are dependent on God. And again, that's a very good thing. We wouldn't want a God who was dependent on us. Freud thought that the reason people believed in God is because they needed a father figure to explain the difficulties of the universe. And yet, he also thought this was a neurosis. We need God because we're unstable and we're desperate for explanations, and in our desperateness we make him into something like a person. Well, the Bible, of course, puts it exactly the other way. God is independent; he's self-sufficient. He's not a neurosis. He is at best a comforter. He's also a judge and he sets the terms of our knowing him. So, it's a precious doctrine. It doesn't mean he treats us like robots, but it does mean everything we do, every breath we take is dependent on our God.

**Rev. Clete Hux**

Most theologians, when they refer to God as being self-existent, they're referring to God being independent of anything in the created order. He doesn't get his meaning, his significance from the created order. He is independent and self-existent.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

God is self-existent. That means he doesn't depend on anyone or anything else for his very existence. Unlike everything else that is besides God, he's independent in that way, entirely un-needing of anything outside of himself, starting with his very existence and then continuing with his sustenance. He has ongoing existence in an independent way, not depending on anyone or anything for that existence or ongoing existence.

### **Question 7:** **What is God's infinity?**

**Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

God's infinity is an attribute of God typically applied to him by systematians. You won't find the word "infinity" in the Bible, but what the term is attempting to capture is the idea that God is without limits, that he cannot be circumscribed by space or by time, but he's of a completely different order, if you like, to the created universe.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

To say that God's "infinite" means he's free of all qualitative limitations. That means anything that's true of God is true without limit. It doesn't mean, as sometimes people think, that everything's true of God. He's not infinitely rock-like; he's not infinitely dishonest. But anything that's true of him is true without limits. So, he's infinitely gracious, infinitely loving, infinitely wise, infinitely knowing. In some ways his

infinity is a meta-attribute. It's one of those ways of describing all of his attributes. So, his eternity is his infinity in relation to time; his omnipresence is his infinity in relation to space; his omniscience is his infinity in relation to knowledge. So, God's infinity is this wonderful truth of him that he never runs out of resources, he's not limited to anything that's true about him. It's one of the main ways we're radically different than God, because we as creatures are by definition finite. We're limited in everything and dependent on God for everything. And that's a wonderful thing to acknowledge when we know that the God who cares for us has unlimited resources to do that.

**Rev. Clete Hux**

God's infinity, or the attribute of infinity, basically refers to him not being measured as we would measure in creaturely terminology. He cannot be measured in time, in space, in history the way the created order is. He's much beyond that. Again, it has to do with his eternal nature. God is infinite. He cannot be numbered; he cannot be measured.

**Dr. Carey Vinzant**

What is God's infinity? In short, it means that God is not limited. It's Probably the *locus classicus* on this topic is Nicolaus Cusanus' *On Learned Ignorance*, where he makes the point that in fact the word infinite, it's a positive term with a negative meaning. It means, "not limited." Now, this has all sorts of implications. It touches on the idea of God's eternity, the idea of God's omnipresence, the idea of God's omnipotence. See, all of those things are tied to limitation. You know, power as we know it is limited. Time happens within boundaries. Space happens, we are spatially limited. We are temporally limited, we begin, and at least physically, we come to an end... The idea of limitation is a very human problem, and the doctrine of God's humanity is simply a statement that he does not have this problem. There's a wonderful little moment in *The Knowledge of the Holy* where A.W. Tozer says, "What a wonderful thing to turn from all of our limitations to a God who has none."

## **Question 8:**

### **What does it mean to say that God is eternal?**

**Dr. Josh Moody**

That God is eternal is describing who God is in relation to our common understandings of time, that he is not bound by our understanding of time. So, right in the nature of who God is, is the description "I AM." So, God is not "I was" or "I will be", but he is "I AM." And so, before the creation of the world, for eternity, God does not have a beginning, he does not have an end. He is above and beyond and through all that. Time is not something that binds him. And so God is eternal. He is Yahweh, I AM. He doesn't begin; he doesn't end. He is from eternity past, eternity future, above and beyond this concept of time, which is one that binds all of our realities, but does not bind God in his own person and nature as the eternal God.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry**

When we say that God is eternal, it means that God has always existed and that he will always exist; so, we can kind of look in both directions. We can look back, and as far as we can see on the time line, if you like, God was always there. When we look forward as far as you like, God will always be there. So, that is the eternity of God. He's not limited by our time scales. He didn't begin when the world was created, he brought it to be, so God existed before the world was created. He's existing right now and engaged with the world as it is, and he will continue to exist when this world comes to an end and God brings out this new heaven and a new earth. He will continue with us forever and ever. Amen. So, that's something about the eternity of God.

**Dr. Richard Lints**

God's eternity is a way of speaking of God's relationship to time. It's fraught with difficulties when we use this language because we want to affirm both that God creates time, the progression of time, but he also orders time; he's sovereign over time. So, there's a sense in which creation, the beginning of all that is, is the beginning of time. But God exists before that point in time, and so to speak about a time before time is itself a conundrum, a difficult concept to grasp. We speak about certain episodes in our own lives as lasting "an eternity." It's a way of speaking about how long that experience seems to be. So it is when we speak of God's eternity. We want to articulate that he experiences the full breadth of history at once, but across time as well. So there is undoubtedly caution and carefulness that's required to speak about God's relationship to time.

**Rev. Dan Hendley**

When we say that God is eternal, what we mean is that he has no beginning and no end. To compare it to human beings, we may speak of the human being having an immortal soul, which means that we'll never die, and so in that sense we are eternal in one direction. But we're not eternal in both directions because we had a beginning. When we say that God is eternal, we suggest that God had no beginning, that he has always existed. So, the question, "Who made God?" is sort of an irrelevant, irrational question. Nobody made God. He has always existed, and of course he always will exist. So, God is eternal in both directions, and that's what we mean when we speak of the eternality of God.

### **Question 9:** **What is God's immutability?**

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider**

By "immutability" we mean that God is not mutable; we mean that God does not change, that his immutability is a reference to his unchanging nature, his unchanging character. He is always loving; he is always merciful; he is always holy; he is always

just. Immutability is sometimes misunderstood to deny that God changes in his way of dealing with people, that there is a static way that God relates to people. But when the Scripture talks about us in Ephesians being “by nature children of wrath,” but now because of the redemptive work of Christ, we are God's friends — we are in a relationship with him — is in no way to undermine that God does not change in who he is, but he does change, by virtue of his own action on our behalf, change in his relationship to us.

**Dr. Miguel Nuñez, translation**

The concept of God implies perfection. And perfection cannot change because then it would become imperfect. God is immutable in every way. God is immutable in his essence. God is immutable in his characteristics as God. When God speaks, that word is immutable. When God is powerful, that power is immutable. When we talk about God's wisdom, that wisdom is immutable precisely because it belongs to God, and God is perfect. God is eternal, the same from eternity to eternity. The attributes of God are all immutable. When we think of a mutable or changeable being, we are no longer thinking about the Creator. We are no longer thinking about God. We are thinking of a creature. The creature is the one who changes, changes when she gets old, changes because he is not perfect, changes because we can improve. When we exist or believe or think something, since we are creatures, we can improve in the future, and therefore, change to improve. But God is perfect. He does not need to improve. He *cannot* improve. It is not only that he is immutable. He cannot change because, by virtue of being God, he is a perfect being in himself, independent of everything, not dependent on anybody. Nothing affects him. Nothing transforms him. Nothing changes him. He does not age. He exists outside of time and space. He is a being without comparison, set apart, and therefore, we can only talk about the immutability of God. So, regarding the question: How is God immutable? In every way that we can think of God, God is immutable. His decrees are immutable. His word is immutable. His essence, as we said, is immutable. His Spirit is immutable because he is God, and God by definition is immutable. God has not become immutable. He is: "I AM WHO I AM" and always will be. In God's case, what he once was, he is today. What he once thought, he thinks today, and he will think the same tomorrow, because everything God conceives is perfect. Therefore, he doesn't have the need to change opinions tomorrow, or change his being, or change his methodology, because from day one he thought of everything immutably; he thought of everything perfectly.

**Dr. Glen G. Scorgie**

One of the many significant attributes of God, the Triune God, is immutability. That's the term that you'll find in many theology texts. Immutability might be translated “unchanging.” And that's really wonderful news because we are so aware of the impermanence and the transience of just about everything in our lives, in our world, in our relationships, and even in our own fleeting lives. I think of that descriptor of God as the still-point in a turning universe. What is there that draws our restless souls to a vision of the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever? I think it's this profound psychological and spiritual need we all have for that which is rock solid,



that which is trustworthy, that which can function as an anchor for the soul when the mountains shake and everything appears to be falling into the sea... We find our strength in this immutable God. Now, in the history of Christian theology, however, there was an unfortunate appropriation early on of some platonic notions of God's immutability that implied that God was serenely detached and unaffected by the problems and struggles of his creatures and could not be touched in any way by what was going on in our chaotic existence. And so, this alien platonic notion of God's impassability effectively distanced God, at least in our perceptions of him, made him a cool and more philosophical essence than the dynamic, impassioned, personal God of Scripture. So I think it's very important that we affirm that constancy of character and that firmness of resolve that immutability truly represents. The God who begins a good work and brings it to completion, that's the God we're talking about. But the immutable God is God the Father who is not untouched by the suffering and neediness of people, who is not unresponsive to their prayers. This God is an interactive, relational God whose stability of character and purpose is something we worship and adore.

**Rev. Peter Cui, translation**

The Bible says God is unchanging. God is life. He is the "Unmoved Mover" who loves us with unfailing love and is ever righteous. He entered into a dynamic relationship with the world, and he affects his creation and gives it, especially human beings, freedom. Under these circumstances, we see God's unchanging nature manifested in his dynamic relationship with a changing world. Because of this, although he doesn't change his standards, he will sometimes change his decisions. For example, God created mankind according to his will, so why did he regret this later? Precisely because he does not change his standards. When the world he created betrayed and disobeyed those standards, an unchanging God must surely move from merely upholding creation, to bringing renewal instead.

**Question 10:**

**How can God be immutable if the Bible says that he sometimes changes his mind?**

**Dr. William Edgar**

There are passages in Scripture which tell us that God relented or that he answered prayer. The impression is given that he thought one way, and then he decided to make a change. And the problem with that for those who read it at one level is that it makes God seem fickle. The Bible elsewhere tells us that he's one, he's holy, and that he planned whatsoever comes to pass from all eternity, and there's no variability, no changeability in that. And I think there's several ways to do this. The most satisfactory way I know is to say that at the level of his being, his eternal decrees, there is no change. But, he made the world significant. He made the world, as the *Westminster Confession* puts it, with secondary causes that he sustains. So, you know, if it doesn't rain, the crops won't grow. If a man and a woman don't get together there



won't be a baby. Now, he can do miracles, but he doesn't generally ordain the world by miracles. He does it with his ordinary providence. So that world is a significant world because choices are real, and he honors the choices people make in his covenant relations. So, for example, when Jonah was called to preach at Nineveh, Nineveh was a very sinful city, and as we know, he didn't want to go — that's another story — but he went and he preached, and the people of Nineveh responded to his message. He preached that there'd be a judgment, and from the king on down to everyone, they repented in dust and ashes, and God saw that their repentance was genuine and he relented from the judgment that he was going to bring. That's because the creation is real; he has a covenant relationship, a relationship of condescension with us. Even the great John Calvin, who is a hero to many of us, I think, was a little bit weak on this one. He said it looks like he relented, but that's just human language, that's language of accommodation. Of course, we know God can't do that. Well, I think it's more than he looked like it. He really did. He really does answer prayer when we pray. It really did make a difference that Jesus died on the cross so that there could be a transition from wrath to grace in history. And that's because the creation is utterly real. So, if you wish, there's two levels here. God's eternal decrees don't change by definition, but he is so powerful that he has decreed that the world is real and that his relationship to the world is dynamic, and he has compassion; he is sorry he made people; he answers prayers; he judges; he relents of his judgment. All of those are covenant relationships. And if we kind of thin that out, we'll make ourselves into robots, and we'll make the world into a theater that's not a real place. The Bible, I think, says both things and doesn't give a rational bridge between the two, but it does allow us comfortably to live with the two. It's God's utter sovereignty, but change happens in response to the creation's decisions.

**Dr. Don Collett**

The Scriptures speak of God changing his mind in order to teach us something about the relationship between his sovereignty and human responsibility. In the Old Testament book of the prophet Jeremiah — Jeremiah 18 is a classic example of this relationship. On the one hand, we're taught that God is fully sovereign, that he can reshape Israel according to his sovereign purposes, but then immediately after that, the next verses that follow teach us that repentance is needed for those who would respond properly to God and come to know him. And so, what we learn — and in the response to the repentance of those peoples, God will change his posture toward them. And what we learn from that then is that while God is fully sovereign — and I say that in an unqualified way because I think that's the way Scripture presents it — the way we respond to him does affect our relationship with him. So, while our responses occur within his sovereign purposes, if you will, those responses still remain significant and important for how God relates to us. That's a very great mystery that I couldn't sort out if I had an hour to explain, but I think Scripture clearly teaches that. God changes his mind as a way of reminding us that, while God is fully sovereign, our responses do affect our relationship with him.

**Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe**

In the Old Testament, you'll have episodes where they speak of God changing his mind. The old translation said that God "repented." A good example is in Exodus 32. And we always have to understand these in a narrative way, that there's a narrative here. And God is, I like to say, a character in the story; he plays a part in the narrative. And in the narrative then, it's picturing God in his relationship with human creatures down here on planet earth and how he interacts with his human creatures. And he speaks; he listens. He sees something; he does something; he watches; he responds; he takes the initiative. So, God is doing things in the narrative. Now, in Exodus 32, God had said to Moses in verse 10, "Leave me alone, and my wrath will burn hot against Israel and I'll consume them, and I'll start over then with you, Moses." Israel had committed the golden calf apostasy, Israel has rebelled against Yahweh, and thereby they have provoked him to anger by worshiping false idols like a golden calf instead of their true God. But he asks Moses' permission — "Let me alone, and I'll wipe out this nation and start over with you." And then 32:11, Moses intervenes, intercedes, and he says, No. "Why does your wrath burn hot against your people whom you brought out of Egypt?" So they're not "my people," they're "your people" whom you delivered. And the "Why" means, "You should not do this." "Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and consume them?'" And so, Moses is arguing, what would the Egyptians think of the God of Israel? What a lousy God that is. And whereas we know that God's desire is to be the God of all nations, through Abraham and through his seed, all the families of the earth will be blessed. God had promised that in Genesis. And Moses knows that, so Moses is making arguments to God in his prayer. And then his petition, then, in verse 12 is, "Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster." That's the word — change your mind — and the word simply means to change your course of action. So that God in history is threatening to destroy the people, and Moses is petitioning him to change his course of action and don't do that, and instead, "turn away from your wrath." Then Moses further prays, "Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel" — Jacob — "your servants, to whom you swore and said, 'I will multiply your offspring, and I'll bring you into the Promised Land.'"

So, Moses makes these arguments that God should not destroy the people right there at Sinai, even though they're rebellious. And verse 14 says, "And Yahweh relented." Yahweh changed his mind. Yahweh turned from the disaster that he had spoken of. So, Yahweh turned away from his wrath and instead spared the people there at Sinai. So, when it talks about Yahweh changing his mind, it means turning away from his wrath and turning to his mercy. And so it's talking, it's referring to God's interactions with his people. And God, like I say, is moved by Moses's petition, and he turns away from that course of action, and he turns to a different course of action... So, God in the Bible is portrayed as interactive, and in that interactive, he prefers to have mercy. His wrath is provoked. He's provoked to righteous wrath and punishment because that's what sinners deserve, rebellious sinners, but he would prefer to have mercy and to forgive. And so, very often it speaks of him changing from this position to this position, and when it does that, it uses that expression, he "changes his mind," or he

does an "about face." So, he turns from punishment to mercy. That's what it's referring to.

**Dr. Richard Lints**

The Scriptures use the language of God changing his mind carefully. It occurs in a number of Old Testament contexts in particular, and we need to be cautious every time we read those texts to understand them in context. So, a famous one occurs in Exodus the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter, when Moses has gone up to the mountain to speak with Yahweh, with God, and God sees Israel's disobedience at the base of the mountain. Moses pleads with God for patience towards his people. And the author writes that God relents; God changes his mind. Being careful, however, reading that in the context that God's ways, God's designs for Israel have not changed. Moses executes a great and terrible judgment, the very judgment he was pleading God to be patient with, when he returns down the mountain. So, in the context, God changing his mind is the changing of the stance towards Israel's disobedience from the vantage point of Israel themselves. There is a sense we must also affirm that God's purposes, God's ways, remain always the same. God is faithful, a language much more common across the Old Testament to speak of God's consistency; what he promises, he will fulfill. So it is that those limited texts which talk about God changing his mind are not because God has realized something he didn't know beforehand, but rather that in Israel's experience, God's judgment is not brought as quickly as they would have expected it to be brought.

**Question 11:****What does it mean that God is omnipresent?****Dr. Jeffery Moore**

We use this word "omnipresent" to describe that God is everywhere at all times, that he is in the smallest place and the biggest place, that he is present on the, kind of on the molecular level. You can't divide creation too small, nor can you look at it on too large a scale without finding God there, and one of the key things is, without finding all of God there. That's entirely beyond our human imagination. We could spend time trying to sort through that and figure out what in the world that could mean. I think it's better to think of God's omnipresence in terms of what actually impacts our daily lives. And there we get our cue from the Psalms: "If I go to the highest place, you're there; if I go to the lowest place, you're there. If I go on the other side of the sea, you're there." The fact that God is everywhere is intended to be both law and gospel for us. I can't hide from him what I'm doing that's wrong — the law side of things — so I can't go somewhere over here where God doesn't see, and do my dirty business, and then come back and, you know, be all sweetness and light. But on the other hand, the gospel side of that is true. I can't wind up so low, so far away that God is unable to reach to my particular situation and bring his love and his grace and his forgiveness.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry**

When we say that God is omnipresent, we mean he's available everywhere. So, it's not just that God is limited in one little planet called heaven, as we sometimes kind of imagine it. What we're thinking about is that God fills all time and space. In fact, he's beyond all time and space. It's very hard for us to imagine with our own imaginative conceptions, but what we're saying is that God is not limited to being in one place at one time as you and I are and we experience that as our daily reality. God is not limited in that way. He's "immortal, invisible, God only wise," as we sing in one of those great hymns. And there is the sense of God being beyond the limitations of the physical body.

**Dr. Josh Moody**

When we talk about God being omnipresent ... what we're saying is there is no place that we can run to that God is not. Jonah could not run away from God. You cannot hide from God. You cannot go to a place where God is not present. God is *omni* — "always" — present. This is either the most frightening truth ever expressed or the most encouraging truth ever expressed, depending on our relationship to this God. So, for the Christian, however bad things are, wherever they are, they cannot be cut off from his loving presence. Whatever they feel about his loving presence, it doesn't change that he is omnipresent. So it is extraordinarily comforting. For the non-Christian, or the person who's not in a saved, justified, righteous relationship with God, it's a frightening reality — cry, "Rocks, fall on me!" There is no way to get away from his omnipresence. And so, this truth should lead us to rejoice if we're his and repent quick if we're not.

**Question 12:****What does omnipotence mean?****Rev. Dan Hendley**

Well, the word "omnipotence" simply means all power or all-powerful. So when we say that God is omnipotent, we are saying that he has all power. Now, some people might hear that and think that we mean that God can do anything, and that's not what we mean by that. We mean that God can do all his perfect will. There's a couple of things God cannot do. One thing is that which is irrational or illogical to do. Can God make a rock so big that he himself can't lift it? Or another thing you can say God can't do is, can God make a four-sided triangle? Well, of course not. Something is illogical or nonsensical; that doesn't mean God's power is limited in that way. God can do everything he wants to do. The other way that we might consider God's power to be limited is that God is only going to do those things that are consistent with his holy character. The Scriptures tell us that God cannot lie. It doesn't mean that he's restricted by any external forces from lying. It just means that God, like every other being in the universe, human beings, animals alike, is bound to act according to his nature. And having a perfect, faithful, truthful nature, God cannot lie. God cannot violate a promise he has made. But that in no way suggests that there's some

limitation on God's omnipotence. We're just clarifying by those exclusions what we mean by omnipotence, and that is that God can do all of his perfect will and there's nothing outside of him that can frustrate him.

**Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

The word "omnipotence" is applied by theologians to God to speak about his all-powerfulness, the fact that God is able to do anything he wills. It's important to put a couple of qualifications on that. For example, God is not free to do certain things. The Bible tells us he's not free to lie; in other words, he's not free to contradict his own nature. Nor is God free to engage in logical contradiction. He could not, for example, create a triangle with four sides. That would involve a logical contradiction. But in line with his nature and in line with the logic that is deeply embedded in his nature, he is otherwise free to do all things.

**Dr. Robert G. Lister**

God's omnipotence is a good reminder to us as believers that when the world seems like it's spinning out of control, feels like it's descending into chaos, it's not. God cannot be bound by another source or power superior to his. The world, whatever else it may seem like, the world is not spinning out of control, God is sovereign, we may have confidence that he has not been overpowered, and it gives us strength to walk with faith in those times that appear mysterious to our limited perspective. When we don't see all that God sees, it is good to know that God has not had his control or his power wrested from him against his will. Whatever is coming to me, whatever is taking place in my life, is taking place under the authority of God's loving hand. And I can take confidence, even when I can't explain my circumstances that I know the God who sustains me and walks through this with me.

**Dr. Scott Manor**

Omnipotence means, in its most basic sense, one might consider omnipotence to mean the ability to do anything, and so we obviously apply the term "omnipotence" to God. And so we would want to say God can do anything. And that's a very sort of simple, straightforward way of thinking about it, but it's a little bit more complex and nuanced than that. And so, you might want to ask the question, for example, that the scholastics did in the Middle Ages: Well, if God can do anything, then that would mean that God can sin. And God can't sin, and so then, we have a question of, is God really omnipotent if he can't do something? And so, what people like Thomas Aquinas and others thought through was how do we nuance our understanding of what omnipotence means so that we don't end up asking silly questions like, can God make a square circle? And so, what they came up with was an understanding that omnipotence means the ability to do anything that's, sort of, inherently feasible, that's inherently possible, and so, because God inherently is incapable of sinning, then inherently it would be impossible for him to commit a sin. And so, omnipotence doesn't necessarily apply in that sense. It's inherently impossible to create a square circle. And so, omnipotence doesn't extend to those categories that are kind of self-negating. It's more for those categories to be able to describe God's power in terms of what things are inherently possible.

**Question 13:**

**How do you interpret the passages of the Bible that tell us that there are some things God cannot do?**

**Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

There are some passages in the Bible that talk about things that God can't do. For example, they say he can't lie, he cannot tolerate evil, he cannot bear the sight of sin. And it might be tempting to interpret these passages as implying restriction on God's power. In fact, I think that's a faulty understanding of what God's power and freedom is. God is all-powerful and all-free to be himself. He is not actually free to contradict his own nature, and that doesn't represent any restriction on his freedom. In fact, if he were able to contradict his own nature, if he were able to say, not exist, he would be less God than he is and would, ironically, be much less free. So, a lot of the problem with those passages relative to God's freedom is actually rooted in our only faulty conception of freedom. Freedom for God is not the freedom to do "A" or to do "B." Freedom for God is the freedom to be God, fully, infinitely, and eternally.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

It's sometimes said that God can do anything, and in a sense that's true if we understand what we mean by "anything." I think that sometimes it's thoughtless if we don't really think through what we mean, and especially when we come to passages in Scripture that say things like, "God is not a man that he should lie or son of man that he should repent," that he should have something to be sorry for. There is a sense in which there are certain things that God can't do. He can't lie, for example, as that verse just said. There are certain things that God can't do, like for example, will himself out of existence. There are certain things that can't do because they are against or completely antithetical to his basic nature, his character. And oftentimes I've had to point out to people that there are some things that God can't do, and we should be glad for it, that God is not the kind of God who can do the things that the Roman gods did and, you know, be capricious and cantankerous, infighting with one another and these kinds of petty things that essentially show God to be nothing more than a glorified human, a human higher up on the scale of strength or higher up on, you know, Mt. Olympus, that sort of thing. In fact, God can't do these things because in his very character, in the infinite nature of who he is, there are some things he really can't do.

Philosophers sometimes will put it this way, that God can't create a rock so big he can't lift, because there are impossibilities with respect to basic principles of logic, which again are grounded in the nature of God. But then there's also moral possibilities that, because of who he is, his goodness and his righteousness and his holiness, he would never perform because he is completely, incomprehensively, infinitely good and righteous. His will stems from who he is, and so the choices that he makes, that flow from him, are infinitely consistent with his character, and so he

would never be arbitrary, he would never be capricious, he would never deceive or tell a lie because that is not in his nature... I am so grateful that God is not the kind of God that we make in our own image, but in fact, it is the participation in his image that gives us any kind of moral credibility and ability in our own lives and the power of the Holy Spirit working to set us apart and to make us like him. So, I think it's a wonderful thing that God can't do certain things because, otherwise, the universe would be arbitrary, senseless, and it might not be moral, in fact. But the Scriptures do teach that there are some things God can't do, and I'm glad for it.

**Prof. Brandon P. Robbins**

Very often you will hear the complaint that when you say God is all-powerful and all-knowing, omnibenevolent, well, if God can do everything, right, why does the Bible say there's things that he can't do, like lie? From a logical standpoint some people will say that the idea, the very concept of being all-powerful is illogical, because could God make a rock so big that he can't lift it? Right? Either way, you're at the horn of a dilemma that you cannot answer. And the basic answer to all of those things is, when we say that God can do all things, we mean that God can do all things that are consistent with his character. And some things aren't consistent with his character, so God can't lie, God can't sin, God cannot deny himself, God can't break his own covenant.

**Dr. Steven C. Roy**

God's power is so great that it can exceed our wildest expectations. Paul says in Ephesians 3:20 that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ever ask or imagine... But with all of these biblical affirmations of God's power, Christians affirm that there nonetheless are things that God cannot do. In particular, God cannot deny himself or his character. This is an implication of divine simplicity which affirms that all of God's attributes work together harmlessly and fit together seamlessly so that one never works at cross-purposes with the other. In particular, with regard to God's omnipotence, Christians have affirmed two major kinds of things that God cannot do. First of all, God can't actualize a logical contradiction. He can't make a married bachelor or create a round square or a square circle. In other words, God's omnipotence never works at cross-purposes with his rationality. The second thing, broad categories, is God can never do something unholy or unrighteous. Hebrews tells us that it's impossible for God to lie. Second Timothy, Paul says that God cannot deny himself. And in James, James says God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone with evil. In other words, God's omnipotence never works at cross-purposes to his righteousness and his holiness. So, that's what Grudem means when he says God is able to do all his holy will. If God purposes to do something consistent with who he is, no one or nothing in the universe can prevent him from doing that. Such is God's power; such is the omnipotence of God.

## **Question 14:**

### **Where is God's love best demonstrated?**

#### **Dr. Don Collett**

God's love is best demonstrated in what I would call the cross-shaped logic of the gospel. That logic is expressed very well by Paul in Romans 5:8 when he says, "God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." This unconditional love of a God who is not saving people that meet conditions, but saving precisely the people that can't meet conditions. That's a very beautiful image of the gospel. And so, I would say that the love of God is best demonstrated right there in the cross of Jesus Christ and in the sending of Christ to us. And that's an important thing to keep in mind, as well as that, for all the hard things that people sometimes say about the God of the Old Testament, it was the God of Israel the God of the Old Testament, who sent Christ as a manifestation of his love, which should teach us much about his character.

#### **Dr. Ramesh Richard**

The best demonstration of God's love must be placed in the background of all the other opportunities for us to think that God loves us. For example, in general care, God's providence in what sometimes we call the general revelation of God, you cannot come to a full understanding of God's love. In fact, there are factors in nature, which compete with one another, which do not say that God simply loves. It says that God cares, the fact that you're alive today. It says that God has providentially provided food even for the birds. But that's not necessarily proof of God's love. The best demonstration of God's love comes from what he did in addressing the fundamental challenge of the human race. We are in rebellion, we have departed from him and we cannot take one step close to him, and so he initiates the sequence and orchestrates and facilitates our salvation. How better to understand God's love in the supreme passion of the Lord Jesus, when God sent his one and only Son, who was not replaceable. He couldn't get another son like Abraham tried to do. He provides his one and only Son to be the Savior of the human race. The best demonstration of it then is found in the cross. The supreme, final, and, I'm going to say, the exclusive demonstration of salvation. God's love of you, unconditional, offered with invitation is that you can be rescued forever.

#### **Dr. Philip Ryken**

If you ask me, where is the love of God best demonstrated, I can give a really simple answer to that question, but I can also give a more complicated answer to that question. The really simple answer is the love of God is best demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for our sins. But I think we can maybe go a little deeper than that. There's a sense in which God's love is demonstrated everywhere. Everything that God has made, everything that God does in the world, everything about his salvation of his people, all of that demonstrates his love for us. But Jesus himself said, "Greater love has no man than this, than that he lay down his life for his friends." And when God himself in the person of his Son, infinitely perfect



one, without any fault or sin of his own, when that innocent one lays down his life and takes upon himself the guilt of all of our sins, there's no greater love than that. And that's why the cross is celebrated really everywhere in Scripture. It's celebrated in the Old Testament as the promise of the atonement that's coming, celebrated as the climax of the Gospels, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And then the whole rest of the Bible is really celebrating Jesus Christ for what he's done for our salvation. And there are lots of reasons why the cross should be at the center of the Christian faith, but this is certainly one of them, that in the cross we see perfectly demonstrated the love of God.

---

**Dr. Don Collett** is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Trinity School for Ministry in St. Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

**Rev. Peter Cui** serves at China Disciple Theological Seminary.

**Dr. William Edgar** is Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Dan Hendley** is Senior Pastor of North Park Church in Wexford, PA.

**Rev. Clete Hux** is Director and Counter-Cult Apologist at Apologetics Resource Center, a Christian ministry which encompasses the full range of Christian Apologetics.

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider** is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Richard Lints** is Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Robert G. Lister** is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University in La Mirada, California.

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum** is Professor of Theology and Academic Dean at Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, PA.

**Dr. Scott Manor** is Assistant Professor of Historical Theology, Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Dean of Faculty at Knox Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Josh Moody** is Senior Pastor at College Church in Wheaton, IL.

**Dr. Jeffery Moore** served at Trinity Downtown Orlando as Senior Pastor from 2003 to 2014.

**Dr. Miguel Nuñez** is Pastor of Baptist International Church in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

**Rev. Vernon Pierre** is Lead Pastor of Roosevelt Community Church in Pheonix, AZ.

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.** is President of Third Millennium Ministries and Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

**Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe** is Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

**Dr. Harry L. Reeder III** is Senior Pastor at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, AL.

**Dr. Ramesh Richard** is Professor of Global Theological Engagement and Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Prof. Brandon P. Robbins** is Staff Apologist at the Apologetics Resource Center for Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Steven C. Roy** is Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry** is Dean and President of Trinity School for Ministry. He is also Professor of Systematic Theology.

**Dr. Philip Ryken** is President of Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL.

**Dr. Tim Sansbury** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theology and Vice President of Administration at Knox Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Glen G. Scorgie** is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, California.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry** is Dean and President of Trinity School for Ministry. He is also Professor of Systematic Theology.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes** is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University and is a frequent guest speaker at churches, conferences, and retreats, in addition to co-pastoring a local church.

**Dr. Carl R. Trueman** is Professor of Historical Theology and Church History and the Paul Woolley Chair of History at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania.

**Dr. Simon Vibert** is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.

**Dr. Carey Vinzant** is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler** is resident faculty member of Theological and Historical Studies at East Asia School of Theology.

**Rev. Valery Zadorozhny** is a pastoral assistant at Evangelical Reformed Presbyterian Church in Odessa, Ukraine.

# We Believe in God

LESSON  
THREE

## HOW GOD IS LIKE US



Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, study guides and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### **ABOUT THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES**

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Third Millennium has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Third Millennium Ministries is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org)

# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Biblical Foundations .....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Basic Strategies	2
1. Way of Negation	3
2. Way of Causation	4
3. Way of Eminence	5
B. Outlooks on Humanity	6
<b>III. Theological Outlooks .....</b>	<b>9</b>
A. Processes	9
1. Technical Terms	9
2. Theological Propositions	10
B. Historical Documents	12
1. Augsburg Confession	12
2. Belgic Confession	13
3. Westminster Shorter Catechism	14
C. Organization	15
D. Implications	16
1. Expectations of God	17
2. Imitation of God	18
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>20</b>

# We Believe in God

## Lesson Three

### How God Is Like Us

#### INTRODUCTION

---

A story is told of a highly respected mathematics scholar and teacher. His books and lectures went far beyond the reach of the average person, and often beyond the reach of his most advanced students. But one day, the reputation of this world-famous professor changed forever. Several international students spent Christmas day with him and his family, and they saw a side of him they'd never imagined. Surrounded by his grandchildren and guests, this erudite professor sat on the floor, happily playing games designed for four- and five-year-olds. The students reported the next day, "It was hard to believe that someone like him could be so much like us."

In many respects, the Scriptures teach this same kind of thing about God. They make it clear that God transcends his creation — he is utterly different. But, they also reveal many similarities between God and creation. As hard as it may be to understand, the Scriptures teach that God is also *like* us.

This is the third lesson in our series, *We Believe in God*, and we've entitled it, "How God Is Like Us." In this lesson, we'll look at what theologians commonly call God's communicable attributes, the ways that God and his creation are similar. Earlier in this series, we defined God's attributes as:

**The perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.**

You'll recall that evangelical theologians have often categorized God's attributes into two groups. God's incommunicable attributes are the perfections of his essence that make him utterly different from his creation. And God's communicable attributes are the perfections of God's essence that are similar to qualities of his creation. In this lesson, we'll turn our attention to this second class of divine perfections, the communicable attributes of God.

Our exploration of "How God Is Like Us" will divide into two main parts. First, we'll explore the biblical foundations for pursuing this facet of the doctrine of God. And second, we'll explore the theological outlooks of evangelical systematic theologians on God's communicable attributes. Let's begin with the biblical foundations for looking into these matters.

#### BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

---

Because of our human limitations, we face countless mysteries as we explore what the Scriptures teach about God. And this is certainly true when we deal with God's

communicable attributes. We've learned in this series that God is utterly different from his creation — not just in some of his perfections, but in *all* of them. But at the same time, everyone familiar with the Bible knows that it often describes God and his creation as if they are very similar. Words like “holy,” “just,” “righteous,” “good,” “faithful,” “loving” and “powerful” are applied both to God and to various aspects of creation. So, as difficult as it may be for us to fathom how these two perspectives fit together, biblical faith calls on us to affirm that God is both different from and similar to his creation.

We can summarize the biblical foundations for pursuing the study of God's communicable attributes in a number of ways. But for our purposes, we'll look in just two directions. First, we'll note three basic strategies that biblical authors followed as they dealt with these matters. And second, we'll consider the Bible's outlooks on humanity that are crucial to exploring the similarities between God and creation. Let's begin with the three basic strategies biblical authors used to teach their audiences about God.

### BASIC STRATEGIES

In an earlier lesson, we mentioned that medieval Scholastic theologians focused a great deal on natural theology. They sought to learn about God by observing nature without much direct attention to the Scriptures. And they identified three formal strategies for discerning truths about God from nature: “the way of negation” or “*via negationis*” in Latin; “the way of causation,” or “*via causalitatis*,” and “the way of eminence” or “*via eminentiae*.”

Now, throughout the centuries, Protestant theologians have rightly agreed that we can learn a lot about God from nature in these ways. But Protestants have also emphasized that we need the guidance of special revelation in Scripture. Scripture serves, as it were, like eyeglasses that bring clarity to what God has disclosed about himself in general revelation. As John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, chapter 6, section 1:

**Just as those with weak vision ... with the aid of spectacles, will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.**

**Natural theology would be what we can learn from nature. That would be the most obvious and simplest way to define what that's talking about. Special revelation would be talking about how God reveals himself, not in nature, in our own persons, in the world around us, but in Scripture and ultimately in Christ, applied by the work of his Holy Spirit. And so it seems the Bible will tell us that God's invisible qualities have been clearly shown in the world around us in creation — Romans 1; Psalm 8... And for those who have eyes to**



see, that is clear. The trouble is we don't have eyes to see, so we're blind, and so what God has done is, he's revealed himself in a special way, in a particular way, ultimately in Christ at the cross, as witnessed by his Word, Old and New Testament.

— Dr. Josh Moody

General revelation always exists. When you look at the sky, that's general revelation. When you look at moral law, that's general revelation. When you see conscience at work in people, that's general revelation... In the end, the only thing general revelation can give people is a knowledge that God exists, that God is powerful, and that God is eternal. But it's only through special revelation that one can understand this eternally existing, powerful God to be holy, righteous, good, loving, and merciful. Understanding special revelation is like finding the master key, and then using this key to decode general revelation; everything becomes visible and clear after that.

— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation

To unpack all of this a bit, we'll consider how each of the three basic strategies appears in Scripture. First, we'll touch briefly on the way of negation. Second, we'll look more carefully at the way of causation. And third, we'll note the importance of the way of eminence. Let's begin with the way of negation.

## Way of Negation

In brief, the way of negation amounts to inferring truths about God by contrasting him with creation. Biblical authors repeatedly drew attention to contrasts between God and his creation — not simply contrasts with sin and evil, but also with the good qualities that God gave his creation. And they frequently honored God by pointing out that he transcends all comparisons. For this reason, this approach primarily draws our attention towards God's incommunicable attributes. But in doing so, it sets the stage for our focus on the communicable attributes of God. Ultimately, we can't begin to see how God is like us without first realizing how entirely different from us he is. So, although this lesson focuses on God's communicable attributes, the way of negation in Scripture reminds us time and again of the great mystery that, in one way or another, all of God's attributes actually are incommunicable.

Unlike the way of negation, the second basic strategy, the way of causation, primarily points us toward God's communicable attributes.

## Way of Causation

In Scripture, the way of causation opens a path for discerning how God is like us by comparing God with the good things he's made. Common experience teaches us that a painting reflects the skills, emotions and thoughts of its artist. And a piece of music reflects the talents and imagination of its composer. And as a result, we can learn a lot about artists and composers by studying what they've made. In many ways, biblical authors did much the same when they drew conclusions about God from their observations of what God had made. Knowing that God is the "First Cause," or Creator, they inferred what must be true about him by noting the good qualities he bestowed on his creation.

The Scriptures make use of the way of causation in two primary ways. For one, they offer direct comparisons between God and what he has made. Listen, for instance, to the way Psalm 94:9 employs this strategy:

**Does he who fashioned the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see? (Psalm 94:9).**

As we see here, because God "fashioned the ear" and "formed the eye," we can be confident that God himself has the ability to "hear" and "see."

What kind of God creates the beauty of the earth, except God who is himself beautiful? What kind of God creates order, except God who is himself orderly? What kind of God can give life, except the living God? There is no end to the truths we can learn about God by noting the good things God has made.

In addition to direct comparisons, biblical authors also employed the way of causation when they made figurative comparisons between God and his creation. At times, these comparisons involved inanimate objects. For instance, in Isaiah 10:17 we read these words:

**The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume (Isaiah 10:17).**

As the larger context of this passage indicates, God was going to destroy the empire of Assyria. To explain how this would happen, Isaiah referred to God metaphorically as a "fire" and a "flame" that would "burn and consume." In effect, Isaiah drew upon the similarities between the consuming powers of fire and the consuming power of God.

The same kind of reasoning lies behind other metaphors for God, like those that appear Psalm 18:2, where the psalmist says:

**The Lord is my rock, my fortress ... my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold (Psalm 18:2).**

Here we see that the psalmist compared God to several things God had made: a great “rock” or boulder, a “fortress,” a “shield,” a “horn” and a “stronghold.” He did this to express how God had protected him and had secured him against his foes.

The Scriptures also compare God to animals. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:10-11, Moses said:

**[God] shielded [Jacob] and cared for him ... like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young (Deuteronomy 32:10-11).**

And along these same lines, Psalm 91:4 tells us:

**[God] will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge (Psalm 91:4).**

As these and many other biblical passages suggest, there are countless ways in which the Bible points toward similarities between God and his creation. And this prominent biblical outlook establishes a foundation for exploring the many ways God is like what he has made.

**Figurative comparisons are essential if we are to understand God and his attributes. We cannot comprehend God. God is not just man on a larger scale. God is God. And so, as God condescends to us and reveals himself to us, he doesn't reveal himself to us in ways that we cannot understand and cannot comprehend. But the grace and mercy of God is demonstrated as God reveals himself to us in ways that are connected to the things that we can understand. So, these figurative representations, these examples, these analogies, these metaphors, these similes, are the only way that we can begin to put together the building blocks for an understanding of who God is.**

**— Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.**

In addition to the basic strategies of the way of negation and the way of causation, the Scriptures also affirm the value of the third medieval strategy: the way of eminence.

## **Way of Eminence**

The way of eminence means the way of “superiority” or “greatness.” This approach also helps us identify the communicable attributes of God by making comparisons between God and his creation. But this third strategy is based on the biblical outlook that, even when God is similar to his creation, he is always far superior, far greater than anything he has made. As Paul put it in 1 Timothy 6:15-16:

**God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever (1 Timothy 6:15-16).**

By speaking of God as “Ruler,” “King” and “Lord,” Paul affirmed that God is similar to human rulers, kings and lords in many ways. But notice also how Paul stressed the superiority of God over all others. He is the “*only* Ruler,” the “King of kings” and the “Lord of lords.” Only God is immortal and only he lives in unapproachable light.

Throughout the Scriptures, we find that God has endowed his creation with power, complexity, vastness, goodness, wonder and the like. And in these and many other ways, there are similarities between God and his creation. But, while this is the case, the Scriptures repeatedly make it clear that God’s power, complexity, vastness, goodness, and wonder are far greater, far beyond what exists in creation. And in this sense, the way of eminence in Scripture helps us to remember that God is superior to us, even as he is like us.

So we see that biblical authors followed all three traditional strategies for discerning truths about God — the way of negation, the way of causation, and the way of eminence. And taken together, these basic strategies establish firm biblical foundations for exploring how God is similar to his creation in systematic theology.

Having considered the three basic strategies that help establish the biblical foundations for pursuing God’s communicable attributes, we should turn to how the Bible’s crucial outlooks on humanity also reveal how God is like his creation.

## **OUTLOOKS ON HUMANITY**

The Scriptures testify that creation in general is like God in many ways. And we can learn a lot about God by carefully studying his creation. But the Scriptures also teach that we can learn even more about God by reflecting especially on human beings. God has granted humanity the honor of being more like him than any other facet of creation. And this resemblance establishes a firm biblical basis for exploring the communicable perfections of God.

Modern science has made us more aware of the vast expanses of the universe. So, it’s easy to underestimate the significance of human beings. We are but tiny specks on our planet. Our planet is little more than a blue dot in our solar system. Our solar system is a miniscule portion of our galaxy. And there are countless, immense galaxies throughout the universe. For this reason, it may seem that human beings are far too insignificant to be considered when we want to learn about God. But as tiny as we are, the Scriptures teach that, in reality, human beings are the crown of God’s creation. As we read in Psalm 8:3-5:

**When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him**

**a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor (Psalm 8:3-5).**

As this passage tells us, humanity may seem small and insignificant compared to the heavens. But despite appearances, God actually made us just “a little lower than the heavenly beings” and “crowned [us] with glory and honor.”

As the author of Hebrews explained in Hebrews 2:5-9, even humanity’s subordination to angels is only temporary. When Christ returns in glory, human beings who have followed him will be exalted above the greatest spiritual beings. In Genesis 1:26, the Scriptures first acknowledge human beings’ special status when God said:

**Let us make man in our image, in our likeness (Genesis 1:26).**

As we see here, in distinction from every other creature, human beings are the image and likeness of God.

Now, the full range of this biblical teaching about humanity goes far beyond the scope of this lesson. But for our purposes here, we’ll simply note that the expressions “image” and “likeness” affirm that human beings resemble God more than any other facet of creation. God made human beings like himself so we could serve as his royal and priestly representatives by filling and subduing the earth for his glory. In the beginning, our first parents were without blemish. Later on, sin and rebellion against God corrupted every facet of human existence. But passages like Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 indicate that even sinful, rebellious human beings continue to be honored as the image and likeness of God. And more than this, God calls and equips men and women whom Christ has redeemed to turn from their sin and be renewed in his likeness. As we read in Ephesians 4:22-24:

**You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24).**

Because human beings are the image and likeness of God, the Scriptures frequently reveal who God is by comparing him with human beings. To mention just a few examples, passages like Matthew 7:11 refer to God as Father and compare him with human fathers. Passages like Isaiah 5:1-7 and John 15:1 compare God to a gardener. God is described as a king in places like Numbers 23:21 and 1 Timothy 1:17. And God is compared to a shepherd in places like Genesis 48:15 and Hebrews 13:20. God is likened to a husband in passages like Isaiah 54:5; the list goes on and on. Of course, the way of eminence reminds us that God is superior to any human father, gardener, king, shepherd or husband. But these and countless other comparisons demonstrate that we can learn a lot about God through our understanding of human beings.

**The question is raised as to whether or not we can have awareness of God and his attributes without gaining at least some awareness of**

**ourselves in the process. And the answer is that those two, in fact, always go together. John Calvin makes this point integral to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. At the beginning you have the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self. Without the knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of self... We were made to be drawn to him, and so the knowledge of him draws us to a knowledge of ourselves. And then a true knowledge of ourselves is integral to knowing him as well.**

**— Dr. Richard Phillips**

Throughout the history of the church, Christian theologians have articulated a variety of ways in which human beings are like God. But by and large, they've concentrated on three main human characteristics. We'll spend more time on these traits later in this lesson, so for now we'll simply provide an overview of these three human characteristics.

In the first place, theologians have emphasized what the Scriptures teach about the intellectual character of human beings. Even though our fall into sin has corrupted our minds, we are still intellectually superior to other earthly creatures. To be sure, the mind of God is far greater than the human mind, but our creaturely intellectual abilities still make us similar to God. As the Bible tells us, in many ways, God thinks, plans and reasons, much like we do.

In the second place, theologians have often stressed the volitional character of human beings, the fact that God has endowed us with human will. Again, sin has corrupted the human will, but unlike a rock or some other inanimate object, God has endowed us with the ability to make choices. We know, of course, that God's will is far superior to the human will, but our ability to exercise our will still makes us like God.

In the third place, theologians have emphasized the moral character of human beings as another way we are like God. Unlike any other physical creature, our thoughts and choices have moral qualities. Now, God's moral character is utterly perfect and, thus, far above anything we could ever achieve. But still, along with angels and demons, human beings are held responsible for the moral qualities of the choices they make.

Later in this lesson, we'll see how the Bible's emphasis on these three human characteristics has provided direction for systematic theologians to explore God's communicable attributes. What the Scriptures say about the intellectual, volitional and moral qualities of human existence has held center stage in formal discussions of how God is like his creation.

Now that we've touched on the biblical foundations for exploring how God is like us, we can move to our second main topic: the theological outlooks on this subject that have developed in formal systematic theology.

## THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

---

It's one thing to recognize the various ways the Scriptures teach that God is like his creation. But, as we're about to see, it's quite another thing to grasp how systematic theologians have built on these biblical foundations. Traditional Christian theologians have sought to determine as precisely as possible how God's perfections — his infinite, eternal and unchangeable perfections — are communicable. And to do this, they've asked a number of crucial questions. For instance, what are these attributes? How are they reflected in creation, especially in human beings? And what is the best way to formulate coherent outlooks on this facet of theology proper?

There are many ways to describe these theological outlooks on God's communicable attributes. But, we'll touch on just four issues. First, we'll summarize two processes traditional systematic theologians have followed as they've approached this subject. Second, we'll focus on several historical documents that represent the mainstream of Protestant outlooks on these divine perfections. Third, we'll explore the organization of God's communicable attributes in traditional systematic theology. And fourth, we'll touch on several implications of these formal outlooks. Let's begin with the processes that systematic theologians have followed.

### PROCESSES

As we said in an earlier lesson, one of the greatest challenges facing systematic theologians is that biblical teachings on God's attributes are scattered throughout Scripture. The Bible never gives us a complete, authoritative list of God's attributes, and it never methodically defines or explains them. So, to fulfill their task, systematic theologians have had to discern these various shapes and colors, and synthesize them into composite portraits, or stained-glass windows, as it were. These "windows," then, give us coherent insights into God's communicable attributes. To create these syntheses, systematic theologians have employed a number of processes.

In the interest of time, we'll touch on just two of the many processes systematic theologians have followed. First, we'll review how they've used technical terms. And second, we'll consider how they've formulated theological propositions. Let's look at their use of technical terms.

### Technical Terms

The Scriptures use a wide range of vocabulary to signify God's communicable perfections. In fact, biblical authors often used different expressions to signify the same concepts. And they also used the same terms in various passages to signify different concepts.

So, to create faithful syntheses of biblical teachings about God's attributes, theologians have adopted technical terms. In other words, they've chosen to use certain expressions and assigned these expressions special meanings. Now, if every systematic

theologian used the same technical terms in precisely the same ways, formal discussions of God's communicable attributes would be much simpler. But they don't. For instance, some theologians have spoken of God's "wisdom" as a broad category that includes God's "knowledge." But other theologians have insisted on distinguishing sharply between God's "wisdom" and "knowledge." In a similar way, some theologians have referred to the "goodness" of God as a broad category. They've included what the Scriptures teach about God's "grace" "mercy," "love" and related terms as expressions of his goodness. Other theologians, however, have defined God's goodness, grace, mercy and love in very specific ways.

For these and similar reasons, it's always important not to worry too much about the particular words that systematic theologians choose to use. The goal of evangelical systematic theology is to create faithful summaries of the *concepts* of Scripture, not to mimic the diverse vocabulary of Scripture. And biblical concepts about God can be expressed in a variety of technical terms.

**Theologians have characterized, or I might say, organized God's attributes in many different ways. And really, all of it is a way of just better understanding who God is. And so when we speak of God's communicable attributes... Things like love, for example, things like truth, for example. And there's a number of others we could list. Some people's lists are small; some people's are large. In all those different ways, again, the simplest way to think about it is, what are things that human beings are meant to be like, meant to do, that God is like and God does?**

— Rev. Vernon Pierre

In addition to the process of employing technical terms in various ways, we should also highlight how systematic theologians have used theological propositions to explain how God is like us.

## **Theological Propositions**

Theological propositions are the basic building blocks of every facet of systematic theology. Broadly speaking, a theological proposition is a sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim. Now, this straightforward approach to God's communicable attributes seems simple enough; but the Scriptures reveal God's communicable attributes in many different genres: narrative, poetry, law, prophecy, epistles, and so on. And each of these genres has different ways of expressing truths about God. So, to create logically coherent presentations of these biblical teachings, systematic theologians have had to infer theological propositions from every biblical genre.

This process of inferring theological propositions is easier with some biblical passages than with others. For instance, the Scriptures contain many claims that are



already in the form of propositions about the perfections of God. David's poetic song in Psalm 34:8 tells us, "the Lord is good." In the epistle of 1 John 4:8, we read that "God is love." These kinds of biblical propositions fit easily into formal theological discussions about God's communicable attributes.

Other Scriptures offer what amount to rather straightforward descriptions of God. For example, in the prophetic book of Isaiah, in 1:4, we find that God is described as "the Holy One." It's not difficult to see how systematic theologians have transformed this description into the simple proposition: "God is holy." And in the genre of law in Deuteronomy 7:9, God is described as "the faithful God." In other words, "God is faithful."

But not all biblical passages fit so easily into formal systematic theology. When dealing with biblical narratives, we can often infer many different propositional statements from the same story. For instance, the account of creation in Genesis 2 illustrates that "God is powerful," that "God is wise" and that "God is good." The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 illustrates that "God is holy," "God is merciful" and "God is just." Every biblical narrative has given systematic theologians opportunities to infer a variety of propositions about the communicable attributes of God.

We also see God's communicable attributes in places where the Bible relies heavily on figures of speech like metaphors, similes and analogies. This is especially apparent in biblical poetry. For example, poetic passages like Psalm 89:26, and prophetic passages like Isaiah 64:8, speak of God as "father" — a metaphor that tells us many different things about God. But instead of using the multifaceted imagery of God as "father," systematic theologians have been more inclined to straightforward propositions like, "God is good."

Poetic passages like Psalm 24:8 and Exodus 15:3, and narrative passages like Joshua 23:10 portray God as a warrior. But systematic theologians have typically narrowed their focus to a proposition like "God is powerful." And on the basis of poetic passages like Psalm 118:27 and the epistle of 1 John 1:5, we could say that "God is light." But systematic theologians have been more inclined to translate this metaphor into a proposition like, "God is morally pure."

We can see that figures of comparison like these reveal that God is like his creation. And in many ways, employing figurative language enriches our discussions of God's communicable attributes. But, systematic theologians have been more focused on presenting these same truths about God in the form of straightforward theological propositions. And by doing so, they've been able to create logically coherent teachings on the communicable attributes of God.

**The question of theological method focuses on Scripture because Scripture is the primary source and the absolute authority, or norm, for all of our theology. And so, when we go to Scripture, we're always trying to ask the question, the theological question of Scripture: What is it that's being taught to us here? Now, when we do so, as we're driven into Scripture, what we immediately encounter is that Scripture is not a manual of systematic theology or anything like it. Scripture has an overarching narrative structure, and of course, much of Scripture is narrative in a more strict or proper sense. And**

we also have the Psalms, and we also have parables and many other genres that we encounter in Scripture. And so, we are faced with significant exegetical questions about, how do we move from understanding the text as it's given to us, to the kinds of doctrine, drawing the teaching out of that text in such a way that it can become useful for theological formulation and argument? And there are, of course, statements in Scripture that are very, very direct about God... But then there's... a lot of the theology that we're given in Scripture is, actually, requires working to those kinds of conclusions based upon what's been written... We have to employ certain basic exegetical principles in order to understand the text rightly on its own terms. And when we have done so, we're going to have insight into who God is.

— Dr. Bruce Baugus

Having considered some of the processes that have shaped theological outlooks on God's communicable attributes, it will help to consider some historical documents that represent how evangelicals have summarized this facet of theology proper.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

If we were to survey the works of leading evangelical theologians, it would quickly become evident that their views on God's communicable attributes are usually very similar. We could refer to any number of lists Christians have used throughout church history to express how God is like us. But for the sake of simplicity, we'll consider the three historical documents that we've mentioned several times in this series. These documents represent common ways evangelicals have developed formal summaries of God's communicable perfections.

We'll review these historical documents by first looking at the *Augsburg Confession* written in 1530. Then we'll examine the *Belgic Confession* of 1561. And lastly, we'll survey the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* written in 1647. Let's begin with the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*.

### Augsburg Confession

You'll recall that the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* summarizes the attributes of God in this way:

**There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.**

This article first mentions elements that have commonly been identified as God's *incommunicable* attributes — how he is *different* from his creation. But the *Confession* also mentions God's power, wisdom, and goodness. These three attributes are commonly identified as communicable attributes, or ways in which God is like his creation, and especially like human beings.

God has endowed creation with each of these perfections, but on a smaller scale. Passages like Psalm 68:34, 35 teach that God possesses power, and that he has endowed his creation with a similar, although lesser, power. Passages like Daniel 2:20, 21 reveal that God possesses wisdom and that he has granted a degree of wisdom to human beings. And passages like Psalm 119:68 and 2 Peter 1:3-5 indicate not only that God is good, but also that he has placed goodness in his creation. So, based on the teachings of Scripture, we can rightly say that God's power, his wisdom and his goodness are all communicable attributes.

With the list of God's communicable attributes from the *Augsburg Confession* in mind, let's turn to our second historical document, the *Belgic Confession*, and recall how it presents God's attributes.

## Belgic Confession

In the first article of the *Belgic Confession* we read these words:

**There is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God ... he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.**

This article of the *Belgic Confession* summarizes the attributes of God with ten terms. The first six are commonly associated with God's incommunicable attributes. The remaining attributes — almighty, perfectly wise, just and good — are commonly identified with God's communicable attributes.

Like the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Belgic Confession* mentions that God is almighty or that God has power; that he is wise and that he is good. But it also adds one more attribute when it says that God is just, or "righteous," as it may be translated. In support of this communicable attribute, the Scriptures frequently speak of God as just or righteous in places like Psalm 7:9. And passages like Hosea 12:6 and 2 Timothy 3:16 teach that human beings can be "just" or "righteous" on a creaturely scale. So, in addition to power, wisdom and goodness, it's certainly appropriate to count justice as a communicable attribute of God.

This brings us to our third representative historical document. Like the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Belgic Confession*, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* also lists God's communicable attributes.

## Westminster Shorter Catechism

To the fourth question in the *Shorter Catechism*, “What is God?” the catechism answers:

**God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.**

The last seven of these divine perfections are communicable: God’s being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Like the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Belgic Confession*, the *Shorter Catechism* mentions wisdom, power and goodness. It also reflects the *Belgic Confession* by including justice. But the Catechism adds the being or existence of God, the holiness of God, and the truth or faithfulness of God as well. Passages like Genesis 1:1 and John 1:3 make it clear that the being or existence of creation is secondary and dependent on God’s being. But we still exist in ways that are similar to God. According to Ephesians 4:24, holiness is a quality of God that is reflected in various aspects of creation, including human beings. And in Scriptures like Psalm 25:5, truth or faithfulness is not only a perfection of God, but it is also granted to human beings.

**God can communicate to us certain attributes of his being, his love, his compassion, his holiness, his justice ... and probably the simplest description of this is in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. “What is God? God is Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable” — those are the three non-communicable or incommunicable attributes — “in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.” Those are the communicable attributes of God. So, we can participate with him in those latter attributes, but being infinite, eternal or unchangeable is not ours to have. And of course, we glorify him for his infinite, eternal and unchangeable greatness in which we do not participate, just as we glorify him for allowing us to participate in his character when it comes to his being, his wisdom, his power, his holiness, his justice, his goodness, and his truth.**

— Dr. Sanders L. Willson

These lists are representative of Protestant evangelical outlooks on these matters. Still, we should add that these documents don’t contain every communicable attribute that theologians have assigned to God. Individual theologians have often referred to other communicable attributes as well. For instance, as we mentioned earlier, it’s common to see God’s knowledge listed as a communicable attribute. And in passages like Colossians 1:10, we find that both God and human beings exhibit knowledge. The mercy of God is often counted in this class of divine perfections because the Scriptures make it clear, in places like Luke 6:36, that both God and human beings are merciful. And of course, the

Scriptures also stress the love of God as a communicable attribute in passages like Deuteronomy 7:9.

Having looked at the processes that theologians follow and several representative historical documents, let's turn to a third facet of the theological outlooks on God's communicable attributes: the organization of these matters in systematic theology.

## ORGANIZATION

As we've seen, different representative historical documents and leading theologians have listed God's communicable attributes in different ways. Unfortunately, this variety often leads inexperienced students to struggle over which list of these divine attributes is correct. But in reality, there's an underlying organization to the communicable attributes of God. And this logical organization helps us see that there is actually a great deal of unity among evangelicals on how God is like us.

Earlier in this lesson, we saw that human beings have the privilege of being like God more than any other creature. And for this reason, the Scriptures often describe God in terms of human characteristics. In many respects, this biblical focus on the similarities between God and humanity has been crucial to organizing the communicable attributes of God in systematic theology.

**Systematic theologians throughout the centuries and creeds and confessions and the like have organized the communicable attributes of God in many different ways... But by and large, when you take a look, and you start asking questions about, why is this taken first, and this taken second, and this third, the main principle that you see appearing again and again in different ways is that people organize the communicable attributes of God according to the ways they understand who people are. And the reason for this is because we are the image and the likeness of God, and God's communicable attributes are the ways he is like us... I mean, the fact is, the Bible doesn't give us a list of the communicable attributes of God. We infer them from the Scriptures, and so when you're using the connection or the similarity between God and people as your way of thinking about these attributes of God, then what you think about people affects the organization of what you do.**

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

We all know that modern sciences like biology, anthropology, psychology and sociology have offered many different ways of understanding what it means to be human. Some of these modern perspectives have much to offer; others misconstrue the true nature of humanity. But, as we mentioned earlier, traditional systematic theology has concentrated on three main ways that human beings are uniquely like God: our intellectual abilities, our volitional capacities, and our moral character. This threefold

assessment of what it means to be made in the image of God has deeply influenced how systematic theologians have organized the communicable attributes of God.

In general, all of God's communicable perfections can be grouped into three broad categories of divine attributes that correspond to the ways humanity is like God: God's intellectual attributes, his volitional attributes and his moral attributes.

We can easily see how God's wisdom, power, and goodness mentioned in the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* align with these three broad categories. Wisdom deals with the mind of God and represents God's intellectual attributes. Power deals with the will of God and represents God's volitional attributes. And goodness deals with God's moral attributes.

Much the same can be said of the four communicable attributes listed in the *Belgic Confession*. The term wise falls into the category of God's intellectual attributes. Mighty represents God's volitional attributes. And the terms just, or righteous, and good represent God's moral attributes.

In a similar way, the fourth answer of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* follows a similar pattern. After the somewhat unusual category of God's being or existence, wisdom represents the intellectual attributes of God. Power represents God's volitional attributes. And the moral attributes of God include his holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

These observations illustrate that, although these historical documents aren't exactly the same, they don't represent significantly different points of view. Despite their variety, they all focus on God's communicable perfections based on three main characteristics shared by God and human beings as the image of God.

This threefold organization also helps us assess variations introduced by individual theologians. For instance, adding God's knowledge to the wisdom of God is simply a way of distinguishing two facets of his intellectual attributes. Adding the term sovereignty alongside the more traditional term power distinguishes two aspects of God's volitional attributes. And adding terms like mercy and love distinguishes various moral attributes of God.

In this light, we can say with confidence that there is remarkable unity in evangelical systematic theology over what should be considered a communicable attribute of God. Although it's always possible to expound upon these perfections in different ways, with rare exception, God's communicable attributes tend to fall into the same broad categories of God's intellectual, volitional and moral attributes.

Now that we've considered various theological outlooks on God's communicable attributes by looking at the processes systematic theologians have employed, several representative historical documents, and the logical organization of this aspect of theology proper, we should turn to a fourth consideration — some of the practical implications of these theological perspectives.

## IMPLICATIONS

There are many ways we could explore the practical implications of God's communicable attributes. But for the sake of simplicity, let's look in just two directions.

First, we'll touch on our expectations about God. And second, we'll mention our imitation of God. Let's begin with the kinds of expectations that we should have about God when considering the communicable attributes of God.

## Expectations of God

Unfortunately, when many well-meaning followers of Christ learn about the communicable attributes of God, they often misinterpret how God acted in biblical times, and they create false expectations for how God acts in their own lives today. God's attributes are always true of him. They don't turn on and off. They never change. But this doesn't mean that all of God's communicable attributes are obvious to everyone every moment of every day. As countless biblical examples demonstrate, God himself doesn't change, and what he does in our lives never contradicts who he is. But at the same time, we can't predict precisely how God will act in any moment in history because he displays his attributes in many different ways.

To have biblical expectations of God, we need to keep in mind a distinction that we've mentioned a number of times in this series — the distinction between God's attributes and his historical manifestations.

As we've seen, all of God's attributes, including his communicable attributes, are without limits, unbound by time and free of all variation. But as God engages his finite, temporal and changing creation, he manifests his attributes in different ways at different times. Some of these manifestations extend over significant periods of time. Some occur only here and there, now and then. But general revelation and the record of biblical history clearly reveal that God displays his attributes in ways that are never entirely predictable.

Think of how this is true of all three traditional categories of communicable attributes. God's intellectual attributes are always true of him. He is always all-knowing and wise. But sometimes, God manifests his knowledge and wisdom plainly in biblical history and in our lives today; at other times he doesn't. This is why some biblical figures acknowledged with joy what God had revealed to them, while others longed for more understanding of the mind of God.

In much the same way, God's volitional attributes never vary. He is always powerful. But throughout biblical history, and in our own lives as well, God sometimes displays great measures of his power, and other times he doesn't. This is why biblical characters sometimes lifted their voices in praise for God's mighty deeds, but at other times they cried out for God to reveal his power as they suffered under the tyranny of their foes.

And the same can be said of God's unchanging moral attributes. God is always good, holy, just, true, loving, merciful, and gracious. But biblical history and our own human experience leave little doubt that God plainly displays these moral attributes in different ways. At times, his goodness is plain for all to see. But at other times, his goodness is difficult to discern. This is why so many biblical characters offered thanksgiving for the blessings they received, while others lamented over the troubles and trials they endured.



As these variations demonstrate, distinguishing God's communicable attributes from the ways he manifests these attributes in history is crucial to having the right expectations about God.

Well, I think that the issue of being able to see God's wisdom, love, power, these kinds of things in creation, in general is more a problem of human perspective than it is of God himself. One of my much needed reminders from Scripture comes in Psalms 73 where the psalmist begins with a lament about the prosperity of the rich and wicked and that sort of thing, and "I'm trying to live for you, and yet I'm being chastened all the time," but then there's the, you know, the turning point about half way through the psalm where it says, "And these things were perplexing until I entered the sanctuary of God, and then I perceived their end." Augustine can talk about, for example, the need for the healing of the soul, that sin has done such a number on us that we think, we process, we understand things awry because our souls are in need of God's healing, and it's only when God does a work that we really can perceive and interpret properly. So, the issue is not with God, it's with our perception. And I can only say that as a person draws nearer to God ... you simply begin to see more clearly how these ideal attributes and God's workings then unfold. But it's not God's problem; it's ours.

— Dr. Bruce L. Fields

The practical implications of God's communicable attributes not only touch on our expectations about God. They also point to the importance of our imitation of God.

## Imitation of God

The Scriptures never call people to try to imitate or resemble the incommunicable attributes of God. They don't exhort us to be infinite, eternal or unchangeable. On the contrary, the Scriptures call for us to humble ourselves in worship and adoration of God because he's so wondrously different from us in these ways. But the practical implications of God's communicable attributes go in a different direction. Of course, we're to adore God for these perfections. But time and again, the Scriptures call on us to imitate the communicable attributes of God.

For example, in Luke 6:36, Jesus said:

**Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:36).**

Here, Jesus told his disciples to imitate the mercy of God. And he set the standard for what human mercy should be. It should be like the moral attribute of God's mercy.

Paul also gave similar instructions in Ephesians 4:32 when he wrote:



**Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).**

Imitating the goodness of God in his kindness and compassion is the standard of goodness for all who follow Christ. In a similar way, 1 Peter 1:15-16 tells us:

**Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15-16).**

Here the author interpreted the frequent call to holiness found in the book of Leviticus as a call to be like God.

**The Scripture is clear that God is holy, and in 1 Peter we are called to be holy because he is holy... I had a pastor tell me that we are the only people on the planet who can reflect this nature of God's character, which is his holiness. And so, when we are being holy, when we're walking in holiness, when we're turning from sin, being separate from the world in that aspect, not only are we doing what God's called us to do, not only are we turning from sin because he called us to and asked us to, but we're actually reflecting a vital characteristic of God to other people. And so the world can look at us; they see our holiness, they see that we're set apart, and they're seeing that most important characteristic of God's nature. And so I think, scripturally speaking, we are to be holy because he's holy, and we do that not only to please the Lord but to reflect his character.**

— Dr. Matt Carter

**In both the old and the New Testament, God calls his people to be holy as he is holy, and so the holiness of God is something that has tremendous practical importance to God's people in every age. And holiness involves at least two things. It means on the one hand to be "separate from" something, and in this case it means to be separate from sin, so as God's people we are called not to have anything to do with sin. But then positively it means to be conformed to God morally, to be like him as much as any creature can be like God. And so, we strive in all that we do, wherever God places us, in the whole range of our relationships and employments and activities, to be like God, his character, in all that we say and do.**

— Dr. Guy Waters

In terms of the three main categories of God's communicable attributes, we're to conform our minds to the mind of God. We're to conform our wills to the will of God.

Our moral character is to be conformed to the moral character of God. But we have to be careful here. As we've seen, God manifests his intellectual, volitional and moral attributes in different ways as he engages his creation. And in many respects, the same should be true for everyone who seeks to imitate God. To think God's thoughts after him means different things in different circumstances. To exercise our wills as God would have it, we must act in different ways at various times. To reflect the moral character of God requires us to live in the right ways at the right times.

For this reason, God's faithful people must learn to imitate God in the light of all that he has commanded in Scripture. The Scriptures provide us with countless instructions to guide us as we live our daily lives. We learn how to display the wisdom of God in various circumstances by applying *all* that the Bible teaches. We learn how to imitate the power of God in different circumstances by studying the *many* ways we're called to exercise our will in obedience to God. And we learn how to imitate the goodness of God in different situations by taking account of *all* the moral instructions of Scripture.

We submit ourselves to the various teachings of Scripture with the full confidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, preparing us for the day when we will be fully conformed to Christ. As we read in 1 John 3:2-3:

**We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3).**

## CONCLUSION

---

In this lesson, we've explored how God is like us by examining the communicable attributes of God. We've seen the biblical foundations for this endeavor in the ways biblical authors compared God with his creation, especially with human beings made in his image. And beyond this, we've also investigated how systematic theologians have developed a number of formal theological outlooks on these divine attributes. We've noted the processes they use, representative lists in historical documents, their logical organization of God's communicable attributes, and some of the practical implications of these theological perspectives for followers of Christ.

As difficult as it may be to understand, God is very different from every aspect of his creation. But as we've seen in this lesson, he is also like us in many ways. And what we've seen in this lesson about God's communicable attributes is much more than mere theory. As we grasp this facet of the doctrine of God, we understand more deeply who God is. And we also understand more fully the kind of people God wants us to be every day of our lives.

---

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams (Host)** is Associate Pastor at Grace and Peace Fellowship in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Williams earned his M.Div. at Chesapeake Theological Seminary and his D.Min. at Covenant Theological Seminary. Before joining Grace and Peace Fellowship, Dr. Williams was Senior Pastor of New Song Community Church in Baltimore, MD. He also served as Minister of Outreach and Youth at Faith Christian Fellowship Church and was Co-Area Director with Young Life.

---

**Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.** is Dean of Seminary at Africa Christian University in Zambia.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Matt Carter** is the Pastor of Preaching and Vision at The Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, TX.

**Dr. Bruce L. Fields** is Chair of the Biblical and Systematic Theology Department and Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Josh Moody** is Senior Pastor at College Church in Wheaton, IL.

**Dr. Richard Phillips** is Senior Minister of Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, S.C. and Chairman of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology.

**Rev. Vernon Pierre** is Lead Pastor for Preaching and Mission at Roosevelt Community Church in Phoenix, AZ.

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.** is President of Third Millennium Ministries and Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

**Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong** is a renowned Chinese evangelist and theologian, promoter of Reformed Evangelistic Movement, and the founder of the Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International (STEMI), Reformed Evangelical Church and Seminary in Indonesia.

**Dr. Guy Waters** is Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Sanders L. Willson** is Senior Minister at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, TN and serves on the boards of The Gospel Coalition, Union University and Reformed Theological Seminary.

# We Believe in God

LESSON  
THREE

## How God Is Like Us Faculty Forum



THIRD MILLENNIUM  
MINISTRIES

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, study guides and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### **ABOUT THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES**

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Third Millennium has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Third Millennium Ministries is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org)

# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b> Can we learn everything we need to know about God through natural theology, or do we also need special revelation?.....	1
<b>Question 2:</b> How can figurative comparisons about God found in the Bible teach us about God's attributes? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b> What does Psalm 8 teach us about our value and significance before God? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b> What does it mean that we are created in God's image? .....	5
<b>Question 5:</b> Is it possible to really know ourselves without some knowledge of God, and is it possible to really know God without some knowledge of ourselves? .....	7
<b>Question 6:</b> Why is it sometimes difficult to infer theological propositions from Scripture, especially narrative and poetry? .....	8
<b>Question 7:</b> How can theologians infer theological propositions from the narratives and poetry of Scripture? .....	9
<b>Question 8:</b> How does God demonstrate his communicable attribute of love for us? .....	12
<b>Question 9:</b> How should God's communicable attribute of love affect our lives? .....	13
<b>Question 10:</b> How does God manifest his wisdom in creation? .....	14
<b>Question 11:</b> What does the Bible mean when it says that God is holy and that we also are to be holy? .....	15
<b>Question 12:</b> How should God's attribute of holiness affect our lives on a daily basis? .....	16

# We Believe in God

## Lesson Three: How God Is Like Us

### Faculty Forum

With

Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.  
Dr. Kenneth V. Botton  
Rev. Bill Burns  
Dr. Constantine Campbell  
Dr. Matt Carter  
Dr. David W. Chapman  
Rev. Larry Cockrell  
Dr. Don Collett  
Dr. Brandon D. Crowe  
Dr. Bruce L. Fields

Dr. Matt Friedeman  
Dr. Jay Haley  
Dr. Dana M. Harris  
Rev. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.  
Dr. Richard Lints  
Dr. R. Todd Mangum  
Dr. Josh Moody  
Dr. Amy L. Peeler  
Rev. Vernon Pierre  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Dr. Ramesh Richard  
Rev. George Shamblin  
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes  
Dr. Daniel Treier  
Dr. Simon Vibert  
Dr. Michael D. Williams  
Dr. Sanders L. Willson  
Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

### Question 1:

**Can we learn everything we need to know about God through natural theology, or do we also need special revelation?**

#### **Rev. Vernon Pierre**

Natural theology really can tell us a lot about God, and we can know this from what the Bible tells us in Romans chapter 1, that God's invisible attributes, his eternal power, his divine nature have been clearly perceived from the creation. So that means something of who God is: his power, the fact that there is a God; the fact that — the type of God he is — that he's not a God of chaos, for example, he's a God of order, that he's a God of purpose. A lot of those things we can tell from the creation that's around us. It's important, though, to say, I mean, this is an area in which we can't say we can know everything about God from the creation, but it does speak to something of who God is by just looking at the creation around us.

#### **Rev. George Shamblin**

When we go outside and we see the trees, we see the stars, we see the moon and the sun; we know there's a God. We *know* there's a God. Many people, though, refuse to accept God. So, we know there's a God, but how can we come to know that God personally? There's two things that the New Testament talks about: we've got general revelation where God is revealed in all of creation. But to be saved, to come to know Christ, we have to have that special revelation, where we read in the Bible that the Word was God and the Word became flesh.

#### **Rev. Larry Cockrell**

When we think in terms of general revelation, all men can have the knowledge of the existence of the Lord, but in terms of coming to know Christ as personal Lord and Savior, that has to do with special revelation, and ultimately one has to be born again

in order for that to happen. To think even more broadly on that, how does one get to that point? Well, that brings us to Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace are we saved through faith and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” So even the capacity to believe, to have faith to believe in Christ as Lord and Savior that has to be given us by God himself. And so, at the end of day, any capacity to know the Lord on a redemptive level, it has all to do with the triune God revealing that to us.

**Dr. Michael D. Williams**

In the early chapters of *The Institutes*, Book 1, primarily chapters 1 through 7, 8, Calvin is arguing — it’s a long argument that he gets to — but he’s arguing for the necessity of Scripture. By God’s general revelation, his revealing himself within the order of creation, within his providential guiding and directing of the affairs of men and nations, and of our own lives and the law written upon our hearts, we can come to a knowledge of his existence, that he is a benevolent power, that he is a sovereign Lord. Yet, in our rebellion we are running away from that. We seek to reject that truth. And Calvin’s argument is that we need, as fallen creatures, we need, he calls it, a twofold knowledge; we need to be returned to a knowledge of God as our Creator, and we need to be brought to a knowledge of God as our Redeemer... God undertakes a series of redemptive acts, acts that are meant to restore relationship, restore his creatures, bring them back to him. But that bringing back includes both a knowledge of him as Creator, to be brought back into that first knowledge, and a knowledge of God as our Redeemer. We speak of these acts in Scripture as the history of redemption, the mighty acts of God, the mighty deeds of God, and they culminate in, they find their center in Jesus... Without God acting in space and time and that being recorded in Scripture as a necessary instrument to us, Christ would remain unknown to us — dressed in the robes. And what’s interesting, and it’s going to sound strange, but what’s interesting here is that was even true within the biblical world. Think of John seeing Jesus coming down the street there for the first time, and he says, “Behold! The Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin in the world... the sin of the world.” Every word he’s used there is fraught with Old Testament meaning. John is using the Old Testament to interpret Jesus as he’s coming toward him. We see the same thing in Jesus’ discussion with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They don’t recognize him. They don’t know who he is. And what’s he do? He opens the Word, he opens the Old Testament, he turns to the writings, and then as he’s reading the Word, then they recognize him. This record of God’s redemptive activity, his redemptive intent is absolutely necessary to a knowledge of God’s creation — because we rebelled against it, we need to be returned to it — of his redemptive ways, and of his sin-bearing Son.



## Question 2:

### How can figurative comparisons about God found in the Bible teach us about God's attributes?

#### Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The Bible has lots of different ways in which it compares God to things in creation. I mean, God is light; God is a rock; God is my song, my strength, the horn of my salvation, a fortress. The Psalms have a lot of those, but they're also scattered here and there in other parts of the Bible as well. But one of the problems we have when we try to go from those comparisons, whether they're metaphors that don't use the word "like" or "as," or similes that use the word "like" or "as," or even analogies like "God is like a shepherd," and things like that, and you get into a lot of details, those kinds of comparisons create problems for us, because comparisons, whether you're dealing with God in creation, or you're dealing with people and other people, or anything even in the created world, when we make comparisons, they are not perfect. Aristotle said that all metaphors are inherently deceptive; they lie. And what he meant by that was that while things are like each other in some ways, they're also *not* like each other in other ways... So, when you find in the Bible that there are comparisons, like metaphors — God is a rock — or similes — God is like light — or when you look and find analogies and things like that in the Bible that describe how God is like this or like that, what you find is that you have to be careful to distinguish between the ways in which God is like those things and the ways God is *not* like those things. Knowing how he's *not* like them is just as important as knowing how he *is* like them. And that's the critical thing when it comes to these figures of comparison in the Bible. And so, when you're trying to derive the attributes of God from figures of comparison in the Bible — metaphors, similes, analogies, parables, whatever it may be — then you have to be very careful always to ask those two questions: "How does this comparison show us that God is like his creation?" But also, "How does this comparison also tell us that God is not like his creation?" And when we can begin to discern those ideas — that distinction between how he is and how he is not like creation — then we can begin to derive, or infer, what these analogies, metaphors, similes, what they say about the attributes of God. In fact, the way you do that is by looking at the whole of Scripture, everything in the Bible, to make sure that you are guided and you are led by the Scriptures in distinguishing between the ways he is like things and the ways he is not like things in the creation.

#### Dr. Sanders L. Willson

Eugene Peterson in his book *Reverse Thunder* — roughly a commentary about Revelation — he calls Revelation a literary video. And the beautiful thing about the Bible, and really, any good literature, is that it's vivid, it's illustrative; it helps us understand. And the biblical authors do similar things. And David would be a classic example when he calls God a rock, the immovable one, the one who is our fortress, our defense, the one who is strong, stronger than all others. That's very helpful for us to understand how powerful God really is. So we should give thanks that biblical

authors, and poets, and psalmists in particular, know how to use visual imagery through literary technique to help us understand the greatness of God.

### **Question 3:**

### **What does Psalm 8 teach us about our value and significance before God?**

#### **Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.**

One of the great things about Psalm 8 is it kind of echoes what goes on in Genesis 1:26-28. On the one hand, there's many things in the Bible that tell us about how great God is, about how vast the universe is, and even verses that tell us the universe is great, you are a small thing compared to the universe. But, both Genesis 1:26, 28; Psalm 8, they tell us about the distinction of humans being given a particular position in God's world, really in God's cosmos, as those who are created in his image. Now, the language "being created in his image" isn't specifically there in Psalm 8, but there's language about being created a little lower than the angels, but also crowned with glory, and then certainly restating the language about humans being given the dominion over creation, dominion, as in good stewardship of the creation, this is what is repeated in Psalm 8. So, Psalm 8 helps us to see, or reminds us, that when God created us, he created us with great significance and purpose.

#### **Dr. Dana M. Harris**

Psalm 8 is a wonderful Psalm. It's actually a theological reflection by David. I can imagine him sitting out on the rooftop in Jerusalem long before pollution, either smog or light pollution, and being able to see the vast array of God's goodness displayed in the heavens above him. We think about Psalm 19. It talks about, "The heavens declare the glory of God." And as David is contemplating this amazing display, he's struck by the seemingly insignificance of humanity. Now, this is actually very relevant for us today. I love astronomy, and I think about, in the last 25 years, the Hubble telescope has given us the most amazing pictures of outer space and deep space... For many people, when we look at these images, it communicates the very insignificance of humanity. So, I think it's important to also consider that when David is contemplating this, what he talks about is the amazing reality is that God has crowned humanity with glory and honor. Now, we fast forward. There's another person in the Bible who was doing theological reflection on Psalms 8, and that's the author of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews looks at Psalm 8 and also comes to that remarkable conclusion: How is it that the God who created everything would entrust that to humanity and crown humanity with glory and honor? But the author goes on to say, we don't yet see that as a reality... So the author then looks to Jesus, the perfect human being, the one who will bring about or restore the glory that was always intended for humanity.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

When you look at Scripture there's a lot of places that can make you feel very, very small. But there are some places where you can look at — like Psalm 8 — that can make you feel pretty good about your standing in the world. Psalm 8: "What is man that thou art mindful of him ... the son of man that you [created] him?" And there it goes. There's the questions, the law of interrogation in Scripture. And through that law of interrogation comes a great answer: "You made him a little lower than the *elohim*." Now, it depends on your translation. Some translations state, they will call that the "heavenly beings" or the "angels." But it's *elohim*, which could mean God — "You've made him a little lower than God, and you've crowned him, and you've given him authority." Just a tremendous passage if you ever want to look at someone and say, "Your value in the Lord? Listen to Psalm 8."

**Question 4:****What does it mean that we are created in God's image?****Rev. Bill Burns**

One of the things we learn in Genesis chapters 1–3 is that humanity, created in the image of God — Adam and Eve as representative of the entire human race — is that being the image of God is not something particular to one ethnicity or to one religious tradition, that God, the God of the Bible, Yahweh, created *all* people in his own image and likeness. And so, that's something that we all share in common, that we have all been created in God's image, and even though humanity, in rebellion against God, has corrupted that image, it's still the case — as we see in Genesis chapter 9 and in James chapter 3 — that even corrupted, even having the image of God, that we are being corrupted by sin, we all are still created in God's image, and therefore, there's a certain dignity to be afforded to all people, and there's a certain sense of unity in the world that all of us have in common, that God created us in his image. And, of course, what we long for is the restoration of what we were created for, which is found through faith in Jesus Christ, through being reunited and renewed in the image of God in Christ. We certainly long for that for all people, but there is still a sense that because we were all created in God's image, there is a certain unity and dignity about all people, of every race, every country, every time and place.

**Dr. Bruce L. Fields**

I do not see how anyone can establish a long-lasting assessment of human worth apart from what God has to say about us... The acknowledgement of human beings as made in the image of God is absolutely critical, and it should be maintained, otherwise the door swings wide open to all kinds of forms of dehumanization that could simply be legitimated by logic, by reason, and do all kinds of terrible things. But what does it mean? It's again one of those areas that much debate/discussion has taken place over centuries. I for one do work from a kind of two-plane understanding of the image. If I may use Louis Berkhof as a model of understanding, where the image of God itself is understood both in terms of a narrower sense and a broader

sense. With the narrower sense, you're talking about the capacities to relate to God properly, and with the broader sense you have the network of human capacities that we have by which we function in the world, things such as mind, the sense of "oughtness" or morals, a sense of nobility, our own uniqueness, spirituality, these kinds of capacities... Berkhof's system allows me to say, yes, the Fall was utterly devastating to us as image bearers, but it did not obliterate it, it did not destroy the image. We do have capacities, we do have abilities that are part of our imaging, and though they themselves are affected by sin still, they still work. Thus we can say, yes, we have been severely damaged by the Fall, yet we remain image bearers of God, particularly when I think of passages like Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9, where we are referred to as "in the likeness of God." These are both passages that take place after Genesis 3, or the Fall, so, it's just a very, very critical area... And there's much in the world that says you're nothing... Well, there's a non-changing perspective alive in the universe, and that's God's assessment, and he says you are an image-bearer. I am an image-bearer. We are image-bearers, and that doesn't change.

**Dr. Daniel Treier**

Views of what it means to be created in the image of God have largely fallen into three categories. The first category that dominated classical theology for quite some time is often called "structural" or "substantial." It's a view of the image of God that emphasizes some essence shared between humanity and God. Often this is associated with the soul or spirit, and the activity that's most associated with this is reasoning. Humans are rational animals, and so the rational part is what establishes our essential connection to God and distinguishes us from animals. The second view, which has come to be dominant in modern biblical studies, is the functional view which suggests that the image of God is explained by the succeeding verses in Genesis that deal with stewardship and ruling in the created order, and ancient Near East studies which have suggested that rulers very frequently would place images of themselves in their temples, and so, by analogy God is functionally using human beings to represent him in his cosmic temple here on this earth. So the functional view, the activity that it most emphasizes is that of ruling or of representing God; that's our function by which we image him. And then the third view, which has been most dominant in modern systematic theology and perhaps modern practical theology or church life is a relational view which often owes a great deal to Karl Barth and his emphasis on the phrase "male and female he created them." And people have taken this and associated it with imaging of the Trinity in a social sense and have said that what's essential to a human imaging of God, is relationality. By relating to one another in love, we most reveal what God is like.

**Dr. Jay Haley**

The Scripture tells us that God created humanity after his own image. What does that mean? Well, the Lord created us obviously with a body and also with a soul, and just as God is spirit, so our soul that God created for us is also spirit. And so we see in this respect that God created us to be in fellowship with him, and to be in fellowship with him forever. And so he created us as a reflection of his own image so we may enjoy him in this particular way. And so, being made in God's image also points to the fact

that he made us as caretakers of this world to reflect who he is in his glory in all that we do on this earth.

### Question 5:

**Is it possible to really know ourselves without some knowledge of God, and is it possible to really know God without some knowledge of ourselves?**

#### **Dr. Josh Moody**

The relationship between self-knowledge and God-knowledge is an intriguing and an interesting one. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, starts with a discussion about how our knowledge of God is informed and in communication with our knowledge of self. In a way, with his background at that time historically, this whole idea of self-knowledge was coming more to the prominence and he was drawing that in from his intellectual background to his theology. So there's a sort of historical quotient to the question. There's also a psychological quotient, I suppose you could say, in that it's hard to conceive how it would be possible to truly know God and to be completely ignorant of who you are both as a sinner and as made in the image of God. Those two surely are in communication in some relation or other. There is also a biblical connection that enwraps all these conversation points, which would be, for instance, "The fool says in his heart there is no God." And that fool is having an internal conversation in his heart about the lack of the existence of God in any real biblical sense and so, therefore, is self-deceived and is unwilling to truly grasp the existence of God. We could also go to Romans chapter 1 where Paul talks about how God's invisible qualities have been plainly seen, and yet they're being repressed through unrighteousness. And so, there is the sense in which, as we get to know God better, we get to know ourselves better. And this journey to the self, that people sometimes talk about in New Age philosophy ... that is actually the wrong path to self-knowledge. In the same way, we really get to know ourselves in communication and relationship with another person — in marriage or in friendship — we really, truly get to know ourselves in worship of the Other who made us. And so, there's a conversation and dialogue between those two points, but ultimately it's not really possible to know who we are unless we worship God, for we are his creation.

#### **Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

All knowledge about God is tied to all of our knowledge about ourselves and the rest of creation. John Calvin, in the first chapters of *The Institutes* actually quoted from the inscription over the door at Aristotle's gymnasium which said "*gnothi seauton*" in Greek — "know yourself" — and he said that's true, you've got to know yourself, because unless you know something about yourself, you can't know anything about anything else. And the reason for this is because you're always thinking about other things in terms of who you are. And so these two go hand-in-hand. Knowledge of God and his attributes, knowledge of us and the rest of creation and the attributes of creation, these go hand-in-hand. And another reason for this is because God reveals

himself in creation. And this is Romans chapter 1, Psalm 19, those kinds of passages that we all know about natural or general revelation, teach that God has revealed himself in creation. So, the more we know about ourselves and the more we know about creation in general, the more we can know about God. But here's the point that Calvin makes in the opening of *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. He says that these two go hand-in-hand. You can't know God without knowing yourself, but you also can't know yourself without knowing God, because it's only in terms of what God says and who God is and what he has revealed about himself that we can even have knowledge of our sinfulness, our goodness, our dignity, our purpose, those kinds of things that are so essential to knowing who we are. So, the question that has perplexed theologians, of course, through the centuries is which comes first? Is it that we know God and then we know something about ourselves? Or is it that we know something about ourselves and then we can learn about God? And the answer is "yes," to both of those options. These two beliefs form reciprocities with each other, they feed back on each other, so that we can never just simply start with one and go to the other, because we always, even as we enter into this life, we have knowledge of God and we have knowledge of ourselves, and so all the time we're coming with a little bit of knowledge of both of these. And so, when we think about these two options of which do I start with, it's sort of a practical question. What am I focusing on today? Am I focusing on life around me and myself in the context of the world? Well, if that's what I'm focusing on at this moment, those things can teach me about God. But here's the other practical question: Today, am I reading the Bible and is it telling me something about God? Well, that's great. Let's start there. And it can tell me things about me and about the rest of creation around me. And so, these two go hand-in-hand, they cannot be separated. And all through life faithful Christians will bounce back and forth from focusing on one or focusing on the other, focus on learning about God so we can learn about ourselves, or learning about ourselves so we can learn about God.

### **Question 6:**

**Why is it sometimes difficult to infer theological propositions from Scripture, especially narrative and poetry?**

#### **Dr. Daniel Treier**

It is exceedingly difficult to infer theological propositions from biblical narratives and biblical poetry. It's so difficult that many evangelical textbooks on hermeneutics and doctrine simply prohibit the practice. They say you don't get doctrine out of narrative, you get it out of Paul's epistles, and as a result, many of our evangelical theological systems have reflected, if not exclusive, at least primary engagement with Pauline texts or with New Testament epistles. So, we need to acknowledge that the difficulty here is real. The problem if we simply acknowledge the difficulty and prohibit trying is that we then rule out engaging substantial portions of Scripture in our theological formulations. It depends on what you count as narrative and poetry in terms of the exact percentages, but overwhelming amounts of Scripture come in narrative and/or



poetic forms. So, if we were to prohibit doing theology and conversation with them, we would be walling off much of the Bible from systematic theological reflection.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

It's interesting as we read through Scripture, sometimes what we'd like it to do is to just give us very easy sets of propositions much like you'd read in an excellent systematic theology. But sometimes it surprises us by not stating things as directly as we might wish. Sometimes the issue there is, is that as the author is speaking to his audience, there's things he can already assume that the audience knows, and he writes really to re-invoke things that they already understand. Sometimes it's also that he's not wishing to develop a systematic theology, but he's interested especially in enjoining Christian praxis, to actually encourage them to do something with the theology that they're learning. And so the praxis and theology will be intertwined in terms of the interests of the author. Another area that you can see that authors sometimes write things in ways that are not as straightforward as you might imagine is in works such as the Old Testament prophets. I was surprised a few years ago when I was teaching a whole year through the book of Isaiah at my church and I was cognizant as after a few weeks that basically, propositionally, we were covering the same things again and again. It occurred to me that you could probably put the number of propositions in the book of Isaiah into a paragraph or two, that God is holy, that his people should repent and worship him, and if they don't he's going to lead them into exile, but there'll be hope in exile and he'll send his servant. Those are the kinds of propositions you would have. And yet it takes Isaiah 66 chapters to get there. And I was forced to encounter the reason why. And I think a lot of it is, as we read through the prophets, we realize that they are speaking in almost poetic fashion; they're intending not to just give us intellectual content, but to really go straight for the heart, to speak to our *affections* the way that we are *affected* by the truth of Scripture. And so they're intending to engage our heart as well as our mind, so they'll use poetic imagery and bring us into the counsel of God and give us an image of what it looks like for God to be holy, give us a series of images about what exile will look like and how perilous that will be in order to invoke repentance, to give us a full description of who the servant is so that we know what the servant is going to accomplish and the servant ultimately being the Suffering Servant that is Christ. And that series of images speaks not just to our minds but also to our hearts.

**Question 7:**

**How can theologians infer theological propositions from the narratives and poetry of Scripture?**

**Dr. Dana M. Harris**

There's a lot of discussion about how we understand the basis of how to use Scripture for deriving doctrine. We often think about propositional statements as being derived from Scripture directly. Now, a propositional statement is a statement that is either true or false, depending on whether it corresponds to reality. So, if I say today is

Monday and it's not Monday, then that's a false statement. But if I say today is Monday, and it actually is Monday, then that's a true statement. So, there's a correspondence understanding between the statement and reality. When we move into narrative or poetry, it's a little bit more complicated. In narrative, often we have events that are being described, so the question always is, is the narrative prescriptive? In other words, is the narrative all by itself teaching us something, or is it describing something. A very good example of this is if we look at the life of David. If we look carefully at 2 Samuel and specifically if we look at 2 Samuel 1–9, we see David under favor. Everywhere he goes he's winning battles, having sons, doing amazing things. This is a man that is clearly experiencing the favor of God. But then if we look at the rest of 2 Samuel, beginning with 2 Samuel 12, we see David very clearly in a very different context. This is David under judgment. In fact, his sons are actually rising up to try to kill him. We have to then look very carefully and ask ourselves what happened, and clearly what happened is 2 Samuel 10 and 11 and the whole incident with Bathsheba. If we look at that example very carefully, we could probably make the case that David breaks all ten commandments in what he does. But if we look at the narrative, the narrative doesn't teach directly what we should or shouldn't do. Instead, the narrative illustrates the consequences. So, when we look at narrative, it's always tricky to try to figure out, is the narrative prescriptive or descriptive? Another example that we could look at is the book of Acts. Is the book of Acts given to us as a manual of how to do church, or is the book of Acts given to us to describe the consistent way that God acts with his people and the unstoppable spread of the gospel? Now, there are some parts of Acts that are clearly prescriptive. For example, the end of Acts 2 gives us a clear indication of a healthy church, a church that is involved in teaching the Scriptures, that has communion, that has prayer, that has real fellowship. But other parts of Acts make it much more difficult to try to derive doctrine. For example, the doctrine of baptism, we might look at one part of Acts and say that that's normative for all believers, but then we could look at another part of Acts and see a different understanding of baptism. In fact, baptism is described at least four different ways in Acts. So, I think the best way to understand narrative is narrative describes how God works, the consistent way that he works with his people, the consistent way that he reveals himself. Deriving doctrine from that takes a little bit more effort and a little bit of caution. Now, we can also ask ourselves, how can we derive doctrine from poetry? The real important thing to understand with poetry is that it's using symbolic or figurative language. The most important thing to keep in mind here is that symbolic language is describing reality. It's not talking about reality in terms of a correspondence theory of reality. So, for example, if we say that the sun rises and the sun sets, that's figurative language, because we know that actually the sun does not revolve around the earth. But everybody understands what's being said there. So, when we look at poetry we also have to also work hard to try to figure out what is being understood with the metaphoric language. Again, metaphoric or symbolic or figurative language is not talking about something that's not real, it's simply describing reality instead of defining it in a correspondence theory.



**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Systematic theologians, because of the way they do their discipline, have to work with propositions. Whether they realize it or not, basically that's what they're doing. And so, they have to derive propositions about God from the Bible. And many times, no matter what genre you're talking about, you can actually find direct, explicit propositional statements about God. I mean, even in the poetry of the Bible, like Psalm 34 verse 8 says that, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Well, that's very close to a propositional statement: the Lord is good. And so, when you come to this passage like that, and they appear throughout the Bible, it's not hard then to start pulling out a theological proposition out of a passage like that. But when it comes to things like narratives and poetry, you often find that you have to infer theological propositions, statements about God, true statements about God from stories that don't really address those matters directly. And so, as you do that, then you have to be very careful, much more careful than if you're just dealing with a straight-up proposition that you happen to find. I mean, if you just think about something like this, like take the story of when God called Abraham and said that he was going to bless Abraham. Okay, well, that's wonderful, and we can make a theological proposition out of Genesis 12:1-3, where God says "And I will bless you." We could say, well, God blessed Abraham. That would be a very particularized, a very specific proposition you could get out of that passage, and that would be fine and fairly easy to get because it's rather explicit in the text. But when you broaden the picture of what you're taking in, when you broaden out to other parts of the Bible, you can make even more general statements than "God blessed Abraham." You could also say this proposition: "God blessed many people many times." Okay? Why? Because when you find in the Bible it happens here, happens here, happens here, happens here, you can make the generalization that, well, God blesses people many times. And, in fact, when you look at the whole of the Bible, you can even get indications that what God did in the days of the Bible — blessing people — he continues to do today. So you can make an even broader theological proposition: God blesses people today. Okay, that would be fine. And those are the kinds of things that we do when we look at specific passages. We go from what it says explicitly then to considering other parts of the Bible which allow us to infer things that are implicit and then to broaden out even further and further and further into more generalized or more universal statements. Now, the problem is, though, sometimes when people do this, when they take one particular passage and start broadening it out and making more general or more universal statements out of it, they'll go too far and they'll say things like, rather than simply saying "God blessed Abraham," "God blessed many people in the Bible," "God blesses people even today," they'll go so far as to say from passages in the Bible, they'll infer falsely that God always blesses all people all of the time. Well, that just simply isn't true, that God always blesses all people all the time. So, that goes way beyond what the Bible says. In fact, it goes against other parts of the Bible. So, all along the way, as we're drawing these inferences about God, we don't just need to look for things that broaden the concept and confirm the concept, but things that actually narrow the concept, narrow the proposition down, clarify it on the sort of negative way, saying, "Well, this is true here but it's not true there; it's true in this way but it's not true in that way." And when we go through that process of taking a

specific passage and going further and further and further, broader and broader into the Scriptures and also into general revelation beyond that, then we can begin to make appropriate and true theological propositions as we read even narratives and poetry in the Bible.

### **Question 8:**

#### **How does God demonstrate his communicable attribute of love for us?**

##### **Dr. Ramesh Richard**

Love is one of the most elastic words in any language, especially in the English language. We use it for all kinds of objects: I love pizza, I love cars, I love computers, I love music, I love technology. It's such a meaningless word if you start applying it to everything. The word love, while it can be defined in many ways, everything from erotic, sexual, physical love, which is a unique New Testament word for love, or in a generic brotherly love... We're talking about God's love for us which is conditioned in himself, which means it's unconditional toward us. It cannot be merited; it cannot be obligated; it cannot be manipulated. God, in terms of his antecedent decision to love the human race in spite of all we are — completely a blight to him because of the decisions that we have made — decides to love us unconditionally, only conditioned by himself. And once he decides to love us unconditionally, nothing is going to overwhelm and separate us from his love. So, we're going to call this "covenantal love," the love without conditions, the love with costs that he ultimately pays in human history in the one full, total demonstration that he loves the human race.

##### **Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

The concept of God's love is something that we often speak of, but very few times do we have a clear picture of what that really means. Unfortunately, we have often a distorted view of love. We hear notions of love in the media; we have notions of love from our own backgrounds and our own family of origin. And so when we hear that God is love, sometimes the concept is run through a grid or blends of understanding that actually distorts it pretty badly... And so, the concept of love is not just a kind of an emotional good feeling or sense of desire. It is deeply rooted in the, not just the emotional side, but it is rooted in the active side of what God does to demonstrate his love toward us. And that's why we can talk about in terms of the Scriptures when it says, "God demonstrates His ... love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" — Romans chapter 5. So, the notion of love in Scripture, and God's love in particular, is not just a kind of general emotional feeling, it is an action that demonstrates his goodness, his care, his concern, and the extreme to which he would go to demonstrate that. So, we read in John chapter 3 verse 16 that, "God so loved the world ... that he gave his only — his one and only — Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." And we often see that verse and think, "Oh, I've heard that, you know, I memorized it at a very young age," but when you begin to really look at that, there's a reason why that verse is used so often, because it is such a great illustration that God, in his love, he has a concern, but

he also does something about it to demonstrate what it means to really be good, what it really means to be benevolent, and to really work toward our salvation in the sense that he sent Christ, and he demonstrates that love for us... So, when it says that God is a God of love, it is not just some sort of emotional kind of nonspecific idea. It is demonstrated in concrete acts that God performs every day, moment by moment, to demonstrate how much he cares for and loves his creation and ultimately in the redemption of Jesus Christ for those who are chosen.

### **Question 9:**

#### **How should God's communicable attribute of love affect our lives?**

##### **Dr. Matt Carter**

Jesus tells us that a new commandment he gives us, and that's to love one another as God has loved us. And the original commandment was we're supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves, but then Jesus takes it a step beyond that, and we're not just to love each other and our neighbor the way that we would love ourselves, but we're to love one another as he loved us. And that begs the question, how did he love us? Well, there's thousands of ways, countless ways that he loved us, but one of the ways that he loved us is to love us first. So, I believe what Christ is calling us to is a pursuing, self-sacrificial love towards others. In other words, we don't wait and kind of hold back with our arms folded waiting for others to love us before we'll love them, but as believers we do what Christ did, which is to love first. The Scripture says that we're to love, we love because Christ first loved us. And so, whether it's with your wife, your children, your neighbors, folks that you work with, pursue them, pursue them with the love of Jesus, and do it first.

##### **Dr. Ramesh Richard**

Our response to God's love, to echo the apostle John, is we love him because he first loved us. Now, how that applies is very specific. And that's why I think the Lord Jesus repeated the first commandment of Deuteronomy 6 in the Synoptics, when he said love him with all your heart and soul and mind and strength... Those four nouns that the Lord Jesus uses are not separate descriptions of the human system. It is all of you, your heart, soul, mind and strength, loving him for all he is. Bernard of Clairvaux, who was a French mystic, talked about four kinds of love. He said there is the love of self for self's sake: I love me for my sake. That would be narcissism. That would be the love of an unbeliever. The second is the love of God for self's sake, to see what I can get out of him, and a large number of people across the human race and the Christian church always fall into that trap: How can I love God for my sake, to get something out of him? A third level is the love of God for God's sake. Period. Full stop. The love of God for God's sake. You love God because he's God. He's not a principle; he's not an idea; he is not a force. You love him because he is God. And then Clairvaux said there is a fourth level ... the love of self for God's sake, and he said that is going to be true of heaven where you see yourself rightly and love yourself rightly as God sees you, but there can be points in time when that could be

your experience as well. The love of self is never commanded. It is assumed. Because when you love God rightly, you can love everything else rightly, but if you love God wrongly you will mess up on everything else, including loving yourself wrongly. So love him for who he is with everything you've got.

**Dr. Kenneth V. Botton**

One of the things that I've found in Scripture, in terms with our relationship with God is an invariable flow. And it never varies. A proper Christian life starts with God, flows through the believer, and then is showered on others. We were designed by God to be channels of his blessing. As a matter of fact, the Jews became the chosen people, and why were they chosen? They were chosen to be channels of blessing to the world. God was going to use the Jews as a conduit, and regrettably along the way they became the "Dead Sea." They became instead of rivers they became reservoirs. Christians, on the other hand, our responsibility is to maintain that conduit. God showers us with love. Example, Psalm 23: "My cup runs over." A well-lived Christian life is always a cup running over, and that means that a Christian is always operating from fullness, and guess what? We distribute the overflow of this full Christian life to others. God has chosen us. He loves us. Why? So that he can use us and we can take his love and we can broadcast it and distribute it to others: from God, through us, to others.

**Question 10:**

**How does God manifest his wisdom in creation?**

**Dr. Don Collett**

God's wisdom is evident in creation, according to the Old Testament witness of Scriptures, from the fact that there's what might be called an "architectural" beauty and wisdom present in the creation. Often when creation is described in Old Testament literature, these architectural images are used. Especially, you could see that in a text like Job 38–41 where God is pointing out his wisdom in creation to Job. And what we learn there is that this structured and ordered space that we call creation, which was once in a chaotic form, is now a cosmos, and ordered space, that's inhabitable. And so, the wisdom is evident in creation in the beauty of this architectural space that the wisdom tradition describes creation in terms of, but also in terms of the way in which this is not just a beautiful space, but it's an inhabitable space; the wisdom of God is evident in that he's created a house, as it were — another image wisdom uses to describe creation — in which to dwell with his people. The purpose of God's original wisdom in creation was that his creatures might commune with him in the house that his wisdom had built, that house being creation.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

God's wisdom means that he always has the best and perfect goals and the means to accomplish those goals. So when we look at his sovereign wisdom in creation, in human history, we realize that that includes everything he does; all that happens

within his sovereign will is seen as his good, wise, perfect determination of what happens. And so, even when we have sin and human folly and sickness and disease and the effects of the Fall, we can affirm that God's wisdom is still at work because he alone has the overarching perspective on everything and knows how everything will turn out, which means he knows everything will turn out ultimately for his glory and our good.

**Dr. Richard Lints**

God's wisdom is manifest in a host of areas. Wisdom — maybe if we back up for a moment and think about the concept itself — is rather difficult to get our hands around. We know it mostly when we see it, rather than being able to describe it in the abstract. So, a ordinary farmer who has lived a life on the land may experience the seasons wisely in a way that most of us urban dwellers wouldn't understand the warp and the woof. We might say, he has gained wisdom by understanding the way God has "wired" those fields. So, to speak of God's wisdom manifest in creation is to speak about the way in which he has made all of creation coherently; it fits together, sometimes mysteriously, but the design, God's design capacity in creation is a wise design. Now, having said that, we must also back up and say, that design is not always evident to human eyes, that his wisdom is sometimes mysterious. So, ordinary human wisdom is sometimes mysterious to those whose eyes don't have manifest abilities. God's wisdom also affirms that in the end everything will work according to his designs.

**Question 11:**

**What does the Bible mean when it says that God is holy and that we also are to be holy?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

When the Bible describes God as holy, it's actually going after a concept that primarily means God is distinct and separate, so the holiness of God is emphasizing the fact that God is divine and that all the attributes and characteristics we associate with God as distinct from human beings, the creatures he has made. In an analogous way, therefore, when we talk about holiness of individuals, we're talking about people who become separate from sinfulness to become more like the God whom they wish to serve.

**Dr. Constantine Campbell**

The holiness of God is a confusing concept for some people, I think. But the key to the idea is that God is other. That's really what holiness means. It means, "not mingled with other things." So God is not mingled with sin; God is not mingled with the corruption of the world. He is "other"; he is separate from all those things. And when, therefore, we are described as holy, when God makes us holy as believers, it means that he has set us apart to belong with him in his otherness, that we no longer

belong to the realm of sin, we no longer belong to the corruption of the world and life in Adam, but we too are other.

**Rev. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.**

When we look at the holiness of God, that God is transcendent, God is above everything, God is righteous, God is holy, God is pure. Everything that is good is embodied within God. So, when we look at his holiness... In fact, in Leviticus 11:44-45, God says, "Man, you are to be holy, as I am holy. I brought you out of Egypt." So, each one of us at some point in time were in Egypt. We were separated from God. So, when God tells us to be holy, he is telling us that we are to be, to seek his attributes of spiritual maturity, of blamelessness. When we look at the book of Leviticus, sometimes we look at it as just a bunch of do's and don'ts, but in reality, what is he doing? He's telling us and giving us his standard for what we should be, that we should raise up. We can look at it as a bunch of laws, but actually God is telling us about his holiness and what he expects from man. So when we look at God's attribute of holiness, can we understand what that is? Can we understand truly what the absence of sin is? But that's who God is, that there is no sin, there is no defects. It is the ultimate, the epitome of perfection. And that's what God's holiness is. In God's holiness, sin cannot be. And so the only thing that we can do as humans is again to trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and only through the blood of Jesus can a holy God look upon sinful man.

**Question 12:**

**How should God's attribute of holiness affect our lives on a daily basis?**

**Dr. Brandon D. Crowe**

God is described as holy in Scripture in many places, and perhaps this holiness can sound like an abstract characteristic of God that doesn't really affect how we live on a day-to-day basis. But, in fact, Peter tells us in his first epistle in chapter 1 that God's holiness should affect the way we live in all our manner of life on a day-to-day basis. Peter says, "As the one who calls you is holy, we also must be holy in all that we do, and he quotes from the book of Leviticus to illustrate that because God is holy, we must be holy in all of our actions. What this means, then, is that God's holiness has very practical ramifications for how we live our lives on a day-to-day basis as obedient children, who follow the teaching of Christ.

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum**

You know, I'm an evangelical Christian, so I really appreciate and rest in the grace of God, the kindness of God, the benevolence of God, the mercy of God, but, you know, it's easy to either forget about or just minimize the holiness of God. That was a prominent theme in the Old Testament. Leviticus 11... Really, Leviticus 11 to 19 is a whole section devoted to God is holy, so you, his people Israel, you need to be holy, and there are whole sections of laws that talk about that you need to be holy, you need to be distinct, you need to be separate in the way you eat, in the way you dress, in the

way you live. Now, some of those are heuristic object lessons for setting apart a people, and it'd be convenient to think, well, that was an Old Testament thing. The problem is at least one place in the New Testament — 1 Peter 1 — you have an apostle that quotes Leviticus and says this is still in play: “‘You’re to be holy as I am holy,’ says the Lord.” And Ephesians 1, as it’s talking about the elective purposes and sovereignty of God, one of those purposes is to take from, yes, Gentile people, people of every tribe, tongue, nation that would have been considered out of bounds by Old Testament standards, one of those purposes of God in his sovereignty and power is to take such people and make them a holy people, blameless to him, blameless before his sight. For us, of course, we start as sinners and we die as sinners, but not just sinners. There’s a sanctifying work that the Holy Spirit does in us that is all too frustratingly progressive, all too irritatingly incremental in its outworking, but the expectation, the ideal, the standard is still there, that we live our lives before a holy God who is gracious, kind, merciful, good, compassionate, but who’s also holy, and because we are redeemed by a holy God, our calling is to be different, different in a positive way, not just a weird way, but in a positive way, that takes righteousness as seriously as God does, that is repulsed by sin as much as God is. Our calling is to be holy and to live holy day-by-day, moment-by-moment, because God is holy.

**Dr. Amy L. Peeler**

We know from Scripture that God is holy. We know from Scripture and from our own lives that we are sinful. So how do you put those two things together, not just conceptually, but in the daily act of your life? There is a certain wing of the church, the Presbyterian, Calvinist, Reformed side that puts a lot of emphasis on our fallenness, that we are sinners, that we can do nothing in our own power. There’s another wing of the church, the Wesleyan, Arminian, "free will" side that puts a lot of emphasis on sanctification that says if God calls us to be holy then it’s possible that we can do so. I’ve had the experience of spending time with Christians in both sides and I’ve learned much from both of them. From the Presbyterian side, Reformed side, there is this important emphasis on the humility that we should all carry, that we are fallen, that we are sinful, that we are dead. Nothing good can come from us, but God has to call us and redeem us by his action. But if you edge too far in that direction you might find yourself waking up day after day saying, “Well, I’m a sinner; I’m going to mess up 900 times today; that’s just how it is.” The Wesleyans, on the other hand, have this belief that everyday should be a progress of sanctification, becoming more and more like Christ. Now, if you go too far in that direction, you can become a perfectionist or rely on your works to gain God’s favor. But if you’re able to keep a balance, you know that you’re sinful, but you know the One who dwells within you, the Spirit that’s been given to you, who can call you forth to good works that God has prepared beforehand, as Paul says in Ephesians 2. So, having that realization of who you are with the realization of who God is can empower you to live into his holiness, not because you can, but because he can, and he will through you.

**Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.** is Associate Professor of Theology and Director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College.

**Dr. Kenneth V. Botton** is Affiliate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Coordinator of Chaplaincy Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Rev. Bill Burns** is a lecturer of Systematic Theology at Redeemer Seminary in Dallas, TX.

**Dr. Constantine R. Campbell** is Associate Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Matt Carter** is the Pastor of Preaching and Vision at The Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, TX.

**Dr. David W. Chapman** is Associate Professor of New Testament and Archaeology at Covenant Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Larry Cockrell** is Senior Pastor of Household of Faith Church and faculty member of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Don Collett** is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Trinity School for Ministry in St. Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

**Dr. Brandon D. Crowe** is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Bruce L. Fields** is Chair of the Biblical and Systematic Theology Department and Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman** is Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship at Wesley Biblical Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

**Dr. Jay Haley** is Adjunct Professor at Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Dana M. Harris** is Associate Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Rev. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.** is Vice President of Academic Affairs at Birmingham Theological Seminary in Alabama.

**Dr. Richard Lints** is Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.



**Dr. R. Todd Mangum** is Professor of Theology and Academic Dean at Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, PA.

**Dr. Josh Moody** is Senior Pastor at College Church in Wheaton, IL.

**Dr. Amy L. Peeler** is Associate Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College.

**Rev. Vernon Pierre** is Lead Pastor of Roosevelt Community Church in Pheonix, AZ.

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.** is President of Third Millennium Ministries and Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

**Dr. Ramesh Richard** is Professor of Global Theological Engagement and Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Rev. George Shamblin** serves at Birmingham Theological Seminary and The Center for Executive Leadership.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes** is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University and is a frequent guest speaker at churches, conferences, and retreats, in addition to co-pastoring a local church.

**Dr. Daniel Treier** is the Blanchard Professor of Theology at Wheaton College.

**Dr. Simon Vibert** is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.

**Dr. Michael D. Williams** is Professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Sanders L. Willson** is Senior Minister at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, TN and serves on the boards of The Gospel Coalition, Union University and Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler** is resident faculty member of Theological and Historical Studies at East Asia School of Theology.

# We Believe in God

LESSON  
FOUR

## GOD'S PLAN AND WORKS



THIRD MILLENNIUM

MINISTRIES

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, study guides and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### **ABOUT THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES**

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Third Millennium has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Third Millennium Ministries is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org)

# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Plan of God .....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Biblical Perspectives	2
1. Divine Immanence	2
2. Divine Transcendence	5
B. Theological Position	7
1. Extreme Outlooks	7
2. Centrist Outlooks	10
<b>III. Works of God .....</b>	<b>14</b>
A. Creation	14
1. Invisible Dimensions	15
2. Visible Dimensions	18
B. Providence	20
1. Importance of Second Causes	20
2. God and Second Causes	23
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>26</b>

# **We Believe in God**

## **Lesson Four**

### **God's Plan and Works**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

---

At one time or another, many of us have made big plans for the future, things we hope to accomplish in life. Small children often imagine that fantastic things are in store for them. Young adults frequently set grandiose goals. But the older we get, the more obvious it becomes that we may succeed in fulfilling some of our plans, but not all of them. In the final analysis, we simply don't have the forethought or the ability to accomplish everything we want to do. Well, in many respects, the very opposite is true of God. The Bible reveals that God has a plan. But unlike the plans you and I make, God's plan will not fail. In the final analysis, he has the forethought and the ability to accomplish everything he wants to do.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *We Believe in God*. In this series we've been exploring the doctrine of God, or theology proper, in systematic theology. We've entitled this lesson, "God's Plan and Works." And we'll explore how evangelical systematic theologians have approached the plan of God and the works by which he accomplishes his plan.

As you'll recall, in earlier lessons we focused our attention on the attributes of God. Under the influence of Hellenistic philosophies, patristic and medieval theologians typically gave top priority to identifying and explaining the perfections of God's essence. And the same has been true for most evangelical systematic theologians throughout the centuries. But God's attributes aren't the only focus of theology proper. The doctrine of God has also given a great deal of attention to God's plan and to how he fulfills his plan.

Our lesson on God's Plan and Works will divide into two main parts. First, we'll consider what the Scriptures teach about the plan of God. And second, we'll look into the works of God. Let's begin by turning first to what we mean by the plan of God.

#### **PLAN OF GOD**

---

As we've seen in this series, apart from the variety of terms we use, evangelicals have held many beliefs in common about the attributes of God. But the same cannot be said when it comes to the plan of God. This topic has been quite divisive because it touches on controversial issues like divine foreknowledge and predestination. Well-informed evangelicals have held very different outlooks on these topics throughout the centuries. And it's unlikely that we'll ever come to complete agreement on them. So, our goal in this lesson will be to discuss these matters as much as we can in ways that promote mutual understanding and respect among various evangelical groups.

To move toward this goal, we'll consider the plan of God from two directions. First, we'll explore biblical perspectives on this subject — what the Scriptures say about

God's plan, or plans. And second, we'll note how these outlooks have led to various theological positions among evangelicals. Let's begin by looking at biblical perspectives on the plan of God.

## BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

In systematic theology, the expressions “plan,” “decree” and “decrees of God” have had rather specific and consistent, technical meanings. But the Scriptures use several different Hebrew and Greek terms related to this same theological concept in a variety of ways. They speak directly of God's plan or plans, but they also refer to his purpose, his counsel or decrees, his will and his good pleasure. We have in mind the Old Testament families of Hebrew words related to: *chashav* (חָשַׁב) usually translated “to think,” “to plan” or “to determine”; *zamam* (זָמַם) normally translated “to purpose” or “to plan”; *yaats* (יָצַא), meaning “to give counsel” or “to decree”; *rahtsown* (רָצוֹן), usually rendered “pleasing,” or “favorable”; and *chaphets* (חָפֵץ) also translated “pleasing.” We should also add the New Testament Greek terms: *boulé* (βουλή), often rendered “purpose,” “counsel,” “decree” or “will”; *prothesis* (πρόθεσις), usually translated “purpose” or “plan”; *theléma* (θέλημα) meaning “will” or “desire,” and *eudokia* (εὐδοκία), which is usually translated “pleasure.”

In contrast with the ways technical terms are used in systematic theology, these and similar expressions in the Bible do not have specific and consistent meanings. As we've said many times in this series, the Scriptures often use very similar terminology to signify different concepts and they use different terminology to signify very similar concepts. In fact, the meanings of these and other closely related Hebrew and Greek terms often overlap in the Scriptures. They also appear in various combinations with each other and are used interchangeably at times. So, as we're about to see, the meanings of biblical terms related to the plan of God vary in different passages.

There are many ways to summarize this variety as we explore biblical perspectives on the plan of God. But for simplicity, we'll focus our attention on just two concepts that we discussed in a previous lesson. We'll consider what the Scriptures say about God planning in relation to his divine immanence. Then we'll consider how the Scriptures speak of God planning in association with divine transcendence. Let's turn first to what the Bible has to say about the plan of God and his immanence.

## Divine Immanence

**In the Old Testament, you know, God would walk with Adam and Eve in the garden. There was an immanence; there was a nearness and a closeness that God wants to have as part of his relationship with his creation and with his people. Sin, obviously, affected that. But it doesn't mean that God suddenly disappears. We see throughout the Old Testament, for example, God setting up a tabernacle to be with his people. And so, that immanence is that nearness, the presence of**

**God near his people, near his creation... In the New Testament we see it more in terms of the incarnation — John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And so, we see that desire of the Lord to be in his creation, to be with his people... It’s his desire to dwell with his people in the tabernacle. It’s his desire to be with his people in terms of Christ’s incarnation. He longs to be with us; he longs to be with his creation, to be near us.**

— Dr. Scott Manor

In other lessons, we learned how important it is to affirm the divine mystery that God is both transcendent and immanent. He transcends the limitations that characterize creation because he is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. But this does not mean that God is disconnected from, or uninvolved with his creation. On the contrary, the Bible also teaches that God is immanent. He condescends and fully engages his finite, temporal and changing creation. And when we survey the Scriptures, it isn’t difficult to see that biblical authors spoke of God planning in association with both his transcendence and his immanence.

We’ll look at what the Scriptures say about God’s plan and his transcendence in a moment. But for now, let’s turn to a few passages that focus on God planning as a dimension of his immanent engagement with creation. In Jeremiah 18:7-8, God said this:

**If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned (Jeremiah 18:7-8).**

In these verses, God spoke of something he had “*planned*” using the Hebrew verb *chashav* (חָשַׁב), meaning “to think,” “to plan,” or “to determine.” Now, in many circles when Christians hear of God having a “plan,” they automatically assume that the Bible refers to something God determined to do from eternity past. But this passage doesn’t speak of God planning in this way. On the contrary, this plan of God is cast in terms of his immanent involvement with creation. It is “announce[d]” in response to the disobedience of “a nation or kingdom.” It is God’s plan for such a nation “to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed.” And more than this, God explicitly declared that this plan could be reversed. As we read here, “if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.” The Scriptures often report that God makes many such historical plans, plans that come and go as he interacts with his creation. Along these same lines, listen to the way Luke 7:30 refers to the “purpose” of God:

**The Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John (Luke 7:30).**

As we see here, this verse refers to God’s “purpose,” using the Greek term *boulé* (βουλή), meaning “purpose,” “counsel,” “decree” or “will.” But, the “purpose,”

“counsel,” “decree” or “will” of God in view in this passage is clearly associated with God’s immanence, not with his transcendence. His divine purpose rose within a particular historical setting as the Pharisees and experts in the law were called to be baptized by John. And this purpose was “rejected” when they refused to submit to this decree. Now listen to 1 Thessalonians 5:18, where the apostle Paul said this about the “will” of God:

**Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:18).**

Here Paul referred to God’s “will” using the Greek term *thélema* (θέλημα). But notice, once again, that this verse is not oriented toward God’s transcendence. Rather, in this passage, the will of God is Paul’s specific instruction: “Give thanks in all circumstances.”

Theologians often call this type of biblical instruction the “prescriptive will of God,” or God’s “prescribed” commands. Throughout biblical history, God required his people to obey his will. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of places in Scripture where God called his people to act, to feel, and to believe in certain ways. Now, these declarations of the prescriptive will of God always conformed to God’s infinite, eternal and unchanging moral character. But God expressed his prescriptive will as he engaged his people in different ways at different times. And the prescriptive will of God is often unfulfilled because his creatures often disobey what he commands.

As just one other example, listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 23:37 about his own “will” or desires:

**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing (Matthew 23:37).**

In this passage Jesus said, “I have longed,” using the term *thélō* (θέλω), the verbal form of the noun *thélema* (θέλημα). This passage does not refer, however, to God’s transcendence. Many times in history Jesus had longed, desired, or willed “to gather [his] children” in Jerusalem to protect them from their oppressors. But Jesus’ desire was not fulfilled because the people of Jerusalem “were not willing.” Israel rejected the prophets and even Jesus himself.

These and similar passages point to an outlook that appears many times in the Bible. The Scriptures often speak of God making plans, having purposes, giving counsel and issuing decrees, as well as his will and his pleasure, as factors of his immanent, historical interactions with creation. And these historical plans of God are finite, temporal and quite often changeable.

Now that we’ve considered how biblical perspectives on the plan of God focus on his divine immanence, let’s look at how the Scriptures also orient God’s plan toward his divine transcendence over creation.



## Divine Transcendence

As we've seen, the Scriptures frequently speak of God planning in ways that emphasize his immanent interactions with creation. But this is only half of the picture. We know that God *transcends* all of the limitations of his creation as well. So, the Scriptures also speak of God's plan in ways that reflect the fact that he is transcendent, that he is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. Listen to the way Isaiah 46:10 refers to the "purpose" and "pleasure" of God:

**I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please (Isaiah 46:10).**

It isn't difficult to see that this passage depicts God's plan in ways that stand in sharp contrast to his historical engagements with creation. God spoke of his "purpose" — from the verbal root *yaats* (יָצַו) — and he talked of doing, "all that I please" — from the Hebrew term *chaphets* (חָפֵץ). But he associated these terms with his transcendence. He spoke of the fact that he "make[s] known the end from the beginning" — a reference to his eternity. And he made it clear that his purpose is unchanging and that it cannot fail. As he said, "My purpose will stand"; "I will do all that I please." We find a similar outlook in Job 42:2, when Job confessed to God:

**I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted (Job 42:2).**

This association of God's plan with his transcendence also appears in the well-known words of Ephesians 1:11, where Paul wrote:

**In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).**

Several key Greek terms appear in this passage. Paul referred to God's plan — *prothesis* (πρόθεσις) — his "purpose" — *boulé* (βουλή) — and his "will" — *thélema* (θέλημα). But notice Paul's orientation toward God's transcendence in this verse.

First, the "plan" of God in view here is not narrowly focused, but all-encompassing; it includes "everything." Second, the plan does not develop in historical circumstances; it's eternal. All who were "chosen" in Christ had "been predestined according to [God's] plan." And earlier, in this same chapter, in verse 4, Paul made it clear that God had chosen his people in Christ "before the creation of the world." Third, the plan of God in view here cannot be thwarted; it's unfailing. Paul wrote that God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" — *boulé* (βουλή) and *thélema* (θέλημα).

In Acts 2:23, the term *boulé* is also rightly translated as God's "deliberate plan." In this verse, Peter said that "[Jesus] was handed over to [the Romans] by God's

*deliberate plan.*” And in Acts 4:28, *boulé* is translated as God’s “will” when the church prayed about what “[God’s] power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” And the same word is translated “purpose” in Hebrews 6:17 where the author of Hebrews referred to “the unchanging nature of [God’s] purpose.”

Now, we saw earlier that the Greek terms *boulé* and *thélema* are sometimes used for God’s historical, prescriptive will. But in Ephesians 1:11, when Paul referred to the “purpose” and “will” of God, he wasn’t talking about God’s prescriptive will. Rather, this verse refers to what theologians often call the “decretive will of God” — what God has ordained as a firm decree, something that will happen without fail.

**God’s eternal plan must also be immutable because God is immutable, meaning that he is unchanging. God being immutable says to us that he’s unlike us. He doesn’t, you know, have to learn, grow, develop over time... And since he is unchangeable, everything that emanates, from him as it relates to his eternal plan has to also be unchangeable... And so, we would know that even before Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden, Christ had already, before the foundations of the earth, had become the Passover Lamb who ultimately would take care, who would atone for sin as such. And so that, tells me that God’s plan, because of who he is, is unchangeable as well, and his eternal will is being accomplished.**

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

Jesus also spoke of the decretive will of God in John 6:39-40:

**This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day (John 6:39-40).**

Jesus referred to “the will of him who sent me” and “my Father’s will” using the Greek term *thélema* (θέλημα). But this wasn’t a command from God that could be disobeyed. Rather, Jesus focused on God’s will as something certain, something that could not be violated. God willed or decreed that Jesus “shall lose none of all those [the Father] has given [him].” The Father’s will in this passage is that “everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life.” This will of God is his sovereign decree. It cannot be frustrated; it cannot be overturned.

From this quick survey, we’ve seen two orientations in Scripture toward the plan of God. Sometimes the Scriptures associate God’s planning, his purpose, counsel, decree, will and pleasure with his immanence — his limited, temporal and changing interactions with creation. At other times, they use very similar terminology with a focus on God’s infinite, eternal and unchangeable transcendence over his creation. And as difficult as it may be, if we hope to be biblical in our understanding of God’s plan, we must find ways to affirm both of these points of view.

With these two biblical perspectives on the plan of God in mind, we're ready to turn to a second issue: the theological positions that evangelicals hold on these matters.

## THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS

Sadly, many well-meaning Christians have emphasized only one side or the other of how the Scriptures speak of God planning. In the past, it would have been relatively easy to associate these emphases with particular Protestant denominations. Through the centuries, distinct tendencies have characterized Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians, Reformed, Anglicans and other branches of the Protestant church. But in recent history, many lines separating denominations have faded, and many of these traditional orientations have all but disappeared. So, we won't speak here in terms of what one branch of the church or another believes. We'll simply sketch some general, basic tendencies that exist across denominational lines today.

We'll look at the variety of theological positions on God's plan in two steps. First, we'll briefly note two extreme outlooks that some evangelicals tend to follow. And second, we'll note what we may call centrist evangelical outlooks on these issues. Consider first some extreme points of view.

### Extreme Outlooks

One of the core values of traditional systematic theology has been to create logically coherent summaries of what the Scriptures teach on every topic. And evangelicals have worked hard to reach this goal as they explore what the Scriptures teach about the plan of God. But all too often, the desire for logical consistency causes us to go to the extreme of acknowledging only one or the other dimension of biblical teachings on the plan of God.

Time won't allow us to go into many details on these extreme outlooks, but we can speak in broad terms. On the one side, many well-meaning followers of Christ are inclined toward what we may call "fatalistic theology."

***Fatalistic Theology.*** Fatalistic theology has taken different forms. But on the whole, fatalism explains everything that happens in history almost exclusively in terms of God's transcendent plan. Now, as we've seen in this lesson, some biblical passages support the belief that God's plan, purpose, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure reflect his transcendence over creation. In this sense, everything that has ever occurred or ever will occur has been ordered by the all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan of God. But fatalism falls short of the full range of biblical teaching on this subject. It fails to give due weight to what the Bible teaches about God's plans, purposes, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure that develop as he interacts with his finite, temporal and changing creation.

**I am not a fatalist. I believe what I do counts. That's why there's a judgment seat. I believe I know what I'm doing. I'm not a robot. I'm**

**actually doing it. But I also believe that God is not limited by my actions. He is able to take my obedience and my disobedience and still solve his purposes. “God is sovereign and he draws straight lines with crooked sticks.” So, I may be a crooked stick, but he can still get his line drawn. So what we have confidence in is not that God is so powerful he turns us into robots, but his power is so majestic that he creates us as free moral agents... That is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Free moral agency does not put God on the puppet string of humanity. Nor does the sovereignty of God put us on a puppet string. God sovereignly ordains our choices and accomplishes his purposes through what we are doing.**

**— Dr. Harry L. Reeder III**

If we were to have a conversation with someone who tends toward fatalistic theology, we might find that they answer several key questions in these ways:

Does God plan something and then set it aside while interacting with creation? Fatalists tend to say, “Never.”

Are God’s counsel or decrees ever frustrated? In the fatalistic view, “Of course not.”

Can the will and pleasure of God ever be thwarted? Fatalists tend to reply, “Impossible.”

And, when the Bible seems to indicate other responses to these questions, fatalists argue that Scripture merely describes events as they appear to human beings, not as they truly are.

Now, with this tendency toward fatalistic theology in mind, it’s important also to note that many Christians through the centuries have fallen into the opposite extreme outlook as well. On the other side, they’ve adopted a position that has come to be known in recent decades as “open theology.”

***Open Theology.*** There’s a lot of variety among open theologians. But on the whole, this point of view explains nearly everything that happens in history in terms of God’s immanence. We’ve seen that there’s biblical support for believing that God forms many different plans as he engages his creation. And in this sense, as God interacts with the finite, temporal and changing world, his historical plans, purposes, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure don’t always come to fruition. But open theology takes this biblical teaching to an extreme. It fails to give due weight to God’s eternal, all-encompassing, unfailing plan. Many who hold to this extreme view agree that a few events have been set in place by God’s infallible, eternal decrees. They often acknowledge that major events like the first advent of Christ, the time of his glorious return, and the final outcome of history are fixed by God’s sovereign will. But other than these few events, open theologians usually maintain that the success of God’s plans, purposes, and will are entirely dependent on history, especially on the choices that spirits and human beings make.

If we were to engage open theologians in conversation, they would tend to answer a few key questions in these ways:

Does God have an all-encompassing, eternal, and unfailing plan for history? Open theology says, “No.”

Are God’s counsel and decrees ever frustrated by human rebellion? In this view, “It’s almost always possible.”

Can the will and pleasure of God ever be thwarted? Open theology replies, “Quite often.”

From this extreme point of view, when Scripture indicates that God has an eternal, unfailing plan, open theists insist that it refers to only a few select events.

**Open theology, or as it’s sometimes called, “open theism,” is a variant of classical Arminianism. It holds a lot in common with that, but it’s a more extreme version of that, especially in its view about God’s knowledge of the future. They hold to a view called “presentism” that argues that God knows everything about the past, everything about the present, and much about the future, but not ... any free human decisions or anything that’s dependent on free human decisions. And believers in all major Christian traditions throughout the history of the church have disagreed with that, affirming that God knows the future exhaustively... Psalm 139 talks about, God knows what is on our tongues before we even open our mouths and speak. There are predictions and fulfillments, especially in 1 Kings and 2 Kings. Isaiah 40–48 give a great teaching about how Yahweh distinguishes himself from the gods of the nations, especially through his knowledge of the future. When we get to the New Testament, Jesus assures us that our Father knows our needs before we even ask. He demonstrates his knowledge of the future by predicting his own passion, his death and suffering, by predicting both Peter’s denial and Judas’s betrayal. The reality is, is that there are many, many examples... In a context where Jesus is predicting both Peter’s denial and Judas’ betrayal, he tells his disciples that, “I have told you this before it happens so that when it does happen, you’ll know that I am he.” That is a claim for his own deity. And so, the question is, would God base such strong evidence for his own unique deity in Old Testament and New Testament on something uncertain, as if God only could predict things that happen in the future as opposed to exhaustively know that. For these reasons, believers in all major traditions have affirmed that God knows the future exhaustively in opposition to the teachings of open theism.**

— Dr. Steven C. Roy

With the extreme outlooks of fatalistic and open theology in mind, let’s turn to other theological positions on the plan of God — what we’ll call centrist evangelical outlooks on this aspect of theology proper.

## Centrist Outlooks

It's fair to say that, in one way or another, the mainstream of formal evangelical systematic theology has affirmed both sides of what the Scriptures teach about God's plan. Centrist outlooks agree that God has an all-encompassing, eternal, and unfailing plan for what happens in history. And they also affirm, with equal strength, that as God engages his creation, he forms many plans that are limited in scope, temporal and changing. It's not that only one or the other is true. Rather, unlike those who have tended toward the extremes, evangelical theologians have insisted that both perspectives are true.

When we embrace the ways the Scriptures speak of God planning, both in association with his transcendence and with his immanence, we face some of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. Human beings can understand these matters as far as God has explained them in Scripture. But we can never grasp them in ways that solve every conundrum, or in ways that answer every question that could be raised. Instead, it's wise to approach this issue much like we do the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. Rather than attempting to resolve every mystery involving God's plan, we should learn all we can about both sides of these biblical outlooks and admit that our human understanding is limited.

If we were to have a conversation with theologians who hold to more centrist evangelical outlooks on God planning, they would tend to answer some key questions in these ways:

Does God have an all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan for history?  
“Yes.”

Does God make specific plans as he involves himself in the course of history?  
“Yes.”

Will the *eternal* plan, purpose, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure of God be accomplished without fail? “Yes.”

But can God's *historical* plans, purposes, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure be thwarted? “Yes.”

In other words, the mainstream of evangelical theology has sought to reflect both sides of the teachings of Scripture. It affirms both God's transcendent, eternal plan and his immanent, historical plans.

While these centrist outlooks have characterized the mainstream of evangelical systematic theology, there have been differences among those who endorse them. We'll mention two significant differences that have often moved to the foreground in traditional systematic theology. Consider first different points of view that have developed on the order of God's eternal decrees.

***Order of Eternal Decrees.*** When systematic theologians refer to the order of God's decrees, they have in mind the logical order of the elements involved in God's eternal plan for history. What are the interconnections among the major decrees that God ordained before his first act of creation? There have been many versions of these points of view, but on the whole it's customary to summarize them in three ways:

In the first place, we should mention supralapsarianism from the Latin terms *supra*, meaning “above,” and *lapsus*, meaning “the fall.” As this name implies, God's

decree to save his people should be placed “above,” or before, his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin. This view of the order of God’s eternal decrees can be summarized in this way: first, the decree to save God’s chosen people in Christ and to bring judgment against all others; second, the decree to create; third, the decree to permit the fall into sin; fourth, the decree to accomplish and offer redemption through Christ; and fifth, the decree to apply redemption in Christ to true believers.

In the second place, we should mention infralapsarianism from the Latin terms *infra*, meaning “beneath,” and *lapsus*, meaning “the fall.” As this name implies, God’s decree to save his people should be placed “beneath,” or after, his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin. This view of the order of God’s eternal decrees can be summarized in this way: first, the decree to create; second, the decree to permit the fall into sin; third, the decree to save God’s chosen people; fourth, the decree to accomplish and offer redemption through Christ; and fifth, the decree to apply redemption in Christ to true believers.

In the third place, we should mention a view that is often called sublapsarianism from the Latin terms *sub*, meaning “under,” and again *lapsus*, meaning “the fall.” This view is sometimes considered a sub-category of infralapsarianism. As the name implies, God placed his decree to save his people “under,” or after, his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin. But in this view, the decree to save came after God’s decree to offer redemption, not before. This outlook can be summarized in this way: first, God’s decree to create; second, God’s decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin; third, God’s decree to accomplish and offer redemption through Christ; fourth, the decree to save those who believe; and fifth, the decree to apply redemption in Christ to believers.

It’s important to realize that, for the most part, these different points of view developed to help theologians address *other* sorts of theological questions. Formulating different views on the order of God’s eternal decrees has helped theologians wrestle with questions like:

How can we maintain the goodness of God when his plan permits humanity’s fall into sin and only grants salvation to some?

How can God’s offer of the gospel to all people be genuine when God has an all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan?

How can we affirm the moral responsibility of human beings when God is sovereign over our actions?

These are important questions. Still, most leading evangelical theologians recognize that the Scriptures don’t give us enough information to identify the logical order of God’s eternal decrees. So, by and large, while centrist evangelicals still tend to favor one view over another, most of us have rightly concluded that these matters involve a great deal of speculation. They are largely beyond what God has revealed in Scripture.

**Well, when one speaks of the order of decrees, usually such discussion is generated out of an attempt to provide a kind of logical order to the way God does things... Before there was anything, that we know of, as "time," God already existed, so there is some element of speculation in that we just don't know what that looks like to God. And that's why the best theologians, it seems to me, when they talk of the order of decrees, really aren't so much talking temporal sequence as logic,**

**as coherence, and in that framework, it's a way of talking about things in order to accommodate all that Scripture says about God, and the Fall, and the sequence of God's plans, and so on, in a logical sense, without it being a sequence in a temporal sense, in order to be faithful to the witness of Scripture.**

— Dr. D. A. Carson

In addition to differences among those endorsing centrist outlooks on the order of God's eternal decrees, evangelicals have also held different views on the relationship between God's eternal decrees and his foreknowledge.

***Eternal Decrees and Foreknowledge.*** More often than not, three New Testament passages are highlighted in these discussions. In Acts 2:23, Peter spoke about the crucifixion of Christ occurring according to “God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge.” First Peter 1:1-2 refers to God’s elect who have been “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God.” And Romans 8:29 says that “those God foreknew he also predestined.” It’s clear that these passages point to interconnections between God’s eternal decrees and his foreknowledge.

By and large, evangelicals have applied these passages to the relationship between God’s eternal decrees and foreknowledge in two ways. On the one side, many of us have held that God’s foreknowledge was the basis of his decrees. In other words, in eternity, God knew the course that history would take. He understood how events would unfold — including his engagements with the choices that spirits and human beings would make. On the basis of this foreknowledge, he decreed the eternal plan by which all events would unfold without fail.

On the other side, there have also been many evangelicals who have held that God’s decrees are the basis of his foreknowledge of history. In this view, God planned or decreed everything that would happen in history simply according to his own good pleasure. And this unfailing plan gave God foreknowledge of everything that would happen in history.

The debates over these matters are often motivated by other theological concerns, like the goodness of God and the free agency of human beings. They also involve disagreements over whether biblical references to God’s foreknowledge focus on God’s mere foreknowledge of events or his personal, loving foreknowledge of the people that he’s chosen for salvation.

But, we can all agree on some things. Do the Scriptures teach that God foreknows everything? Yes. Do the Scriptures teach that God has foreordained everything, including eternal salvation? Yes. So, as much as we may favor one of these outlooks over the other, in the end, we should all admit that God’s decrees and his foreknowledge go hand in hand in many different ways. And we must always keep in mind that we’re discussing God in eternity, so our normal ways of thinking don’t apply. Being dogmatic about the logical priority of God’s decrees or his foreknowledge is to go beyond what the Scriptures reveal. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, chapter 21, section 5, John Calvin argued:



**We, indeed, place both doctrines [of foreknowledge and eternal decrees] in God, but we say that subjecting one to the other is absurd.**

Calvin was well-known for his firm belief in God's sovereignty over all of history. As he pointed out here, the Scriptures don't spell out precisely how God's foreknowledge and eternal decrees relate to each other. So, "subjecting one to the other is absurd."

Ultimately, whenever we consider the plan of God, we must remember that both sides of the biblical portrait — those reflected in centrist evangelical outlooks — are crucial to the Christian life. God is sovereign over every trial and trouble in life. Everything in life takes place as God has ordained. At the same time, God is intimately involved with our lives. He turns history in one direction and then in another direction, often depending on the choices we make. If we deny either of these views, we rob ourselves of some of the most vibrant, life-giving teachings of Scripture. Both sides of biblical teaching on God planning, having purposes, giving counsel and making decrees, as well as his will and pleasure are crucial to our faithful service as followers of Christ.

**One of the perennial questions in theology has to do with the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, between the choices that we make and the ultimate will and purposes of God. And I think you find many theologians that will emphasize one side of that perhaps more so than the other side of it. I think the really great theologians teach both of those things in their biblical fullness. But regardless of our view, I think there is something that we can learn from one another. I think people who emphasize human choice tend to minimize a little bit the biblical passages that talk about the sovereignty of God and how all-encompassing it is and how everything that happens ultimately is the purpose of God. And on the other hand, people that really like to emphasize the sovereignty of God may minimize the real choices that people make and the significance of those choices for what happens in the world. And I think it's tempting for all of us to gravitate a little bit towards the passages that agree with our theology and then to explain away a little bit or minimize the passages that might support someone else's view. I think the more that we engage in theological dialogue with one another, it helps us see the significance of every passage of Scripture and really wrestle with its implications.**

**— Dr. Philip Ryken**

Having seen how the Scriptures and systematic theology view the plan of God, we're in a position to turn to the second major topic of this lesson: the works of God. At this point, we'll explore how God works out both his eternal plan and his many historical plans for creation.

## WORKS OF GOD

---

The Scriptures focus a lot on what God has done, what he is doing and what he will do in the history of the world. The importance of these themes in the Bible has led theologians to give them special attention in theology proper. In theology proper, systematic theologians explore the fundamental characteristics of all of God's works — the patterns that underlie all of God's engagements with his creation.

Throughout the centuries, the topic of the works of God has usually been divided into two main parts: the work of creation and the work of providence. Let's look first at God's work of creation.

### CREATION

Systematic theologians have focused a lot on the moment when God created *ex nihilo* or “out of nothing.” Passages like Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; and Hebrews 1:2 indicate that nothing apart from God ever existed until God brought it into existence. So, evangelicals have rightly rejected all forms of polytheism — every belief that gods or god-like forces joined with God in the work of creation. They've also rejected all forms of pantheism — any identification of God with his creation. And they've rejected all forms of dualism — the belief that what we call creation has actually existed from all eternity alongside God. Instead, evangelical systematic theology has consistently maintained the utter distinction between the Creator and his creation.

But systematic theology has also gone beyond the first moment of creation and has dealt with an initial twofold division that God established in creation. This twofold division of creation appears in Colossians 1:16, where the apostle Paul said this:

**For in [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him (Colossians 1:16).**

Here we see that Paul referred to Christ as the one who created all things. And he alluded to the twofold division of creation between heaven and earth found in Genesis 1:1. But Paul went on to make a parallel division between the visible and invisible. This division of creation is exemplified in a number of important creeds and confessions that speak of God as the Creator of “all things, visible and invisible.”

Now, before we go any further, we should mention that, in passages like Isaiah 66:1, the Scriptures bring both sides of this twofold division into unity. There we read:

**Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool (Isaiah 66:1).**

This passage succinctly explains an outlook that runs just beneath the surface of every page of Scripture. In effect, creation is God's cosmic palace or temple, with heaven above and earth below, the invisible above and the visible below.

In the Old Testament, Israel's temple was modeled after this twofold arrangement of the creation. It had an inner, elevated chamber known as the most holy place, or the holy of holies. This chamber represented God's reign in the upper, invisible realms of creation. And this elevated chamber was surrounded by lower levels of the temple known as the holy place and the outer court or courtyard. Both of these lower levels represented the lower, visible realms of creation.

This basic twofold outlook on creation helps us understand God's grand purpose for his creation. Simply put, the goal of history is that God's glorious reign in the upper, invisible world will extend downward and one day spread to every corner of the visible world. And in the end, God's glory will fill all of creation so that every creature, above and below, will worship him forever. This basic outlook underlies everything that the Bible tells us about God's work of creation.

**The goal of human history is the whole earth being transformed into the visible and immanent temple, garden, realm, throne of God. And it's the very same purpose with which the Bible opens in Genesis 1 and 2, that God made a world that was very good, but he made a garden in which his presence was immanent and visible, and it was a holy place, and the man and the woman were told to spread the garden, in effect, to the whole world by multiplying, filling it, subduing it. And of course, in the Fall, that program is interrupted, but yet in the promise in the garden, that there would be a seed of the woman which would bruise the serpent's head, that promise is ultimately fulfilled. And so the earth becomes a place where the glory of God is not hidden any longer, but it's an earth filled with the glory of God.**

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Because this twofold work of creation is so important, we should take a moment to look at both the upper, invisible dimensions of creation and the lower, visible dimensions of creation. Consider first, the invisible dimensions of what God has made.

## **Invisible Dimensions**

Modern materialism has influenced followers of Christ so much that many serious students of theology pay little attention to what the Bible teaches about the invisible dimensions of creation. To be sure, many sincere believers become overly preoccupied with what remains largely unseen. But, in academic study, we have to guard against the opposite extreme. So much of God's plan for his creation is initiated and furthered by what takes place in the invisible realms. So, as we study the doctrine of God, we must take into account what theologians often call the "preternatural world."

There are many ways to describe the upper, invisible dimensions of creation. But for our purposes, we'll look first at the arrangement of the invisible realms. Then, we'll

look into their occupants. Let's think first about the arrangement of the preternatural world.

**Arrangement.** The primary biblical term for this dimension of creation is “heaven” or “the heavens.” Both the Hebrew *shamayim* (שָׁמַיִם) and the Greek *ouranos* (οὐρανός), can be translated “heaven” or “the heavens.” But these words also refer, at times, to what modern people call the “sky” and “outer space.” So, in our discussion of the preternatural world, we'll just focus on the times when they refer to the upper realms — the realms that remain invisible to human beings, except when God grants supernatural visions of them.

The Scriptures don't give much detail about the arrangement of the invisible heavens, but they indicate that it's quite complex. For instance, passages like Psalm 104:3 speak of God's heavenly upper room or “roof chamber.” According to 1 Kings 8:30, and a number of other passages, this heavenly chamber is “heaven, [God's] dwelling place,” or as it may be translated, “heaven, the place of [God's] enthronement.” Isaiah 63:15 describes this same heavenly palace as the place of “your lofty throne, holy and glorious.” In addition, in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, Paul drew from rabbinical theology and spoke of “the third heaven,” calling it a “paradise ... [of] inexpressible things.” And beyond this, Deuteronomy 10:14; Psalm 115:16 and a number of other passages refer to “the highest heavens.” These and similar biblical references alert us to the fact that the arrangement of the invisible world is quite complex and goes far beyond our comprehension. Even so, these and many other verses indicate that the invisible, heavenly realms are arranged as the upper, exalted dimensions of God's cosmic palace.

In addition to recognizing this complex arrangement, we should also take note of the occupants of the invisible dimensions of creation.

**Occupants.** Needless to say, the most glorious of all occupants of heaven is God himself. But we have to be careful here. Many think of heaven as the place where God exists in his full transcendence. But this is not the case at all. Heaven is a part of creation. It is finite, temporal and changing. Although, heaven is above the visible world, it is nonetheless a place where God engages his creation. Now, in 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon declared that God is so transcendent that “even the highest heavens cannot contain [him].” But, in the same prayer, Solomon spoke of heaven as the place of God's enthronement — the place where God hears and responds to his people's prayers. So, heaven is a place where God enters into the finite creation by sitting on a throne and engaging his heavenly creatures. We see this in passages like Job 1:6-12; Daniel 7:9-11; and Luke 22:31. God's heavenly throne room is exalted above the visible world. But it's nonetheless a part of his creation. And from the beginning of history, when God said, “Let there be light,” he has directed history as the King of creation from his heavenly court.

But God isn't the only occupant of the upper, invisible realms. For instance, although it's rare for physical creatures to enter heaven, it's not impossible. We know for certain that, according to Acts 2:31-33, Jesus ascended in his glorified physical body to the throne of his father David. And he now sits at the right hand of God the Father in the court of heaven.

But for the most part, heaven is filled with spiritual creatures, as well as the departed souls of the faithful. They and their activities remain invisible apart from

supernatural visions. They are called “spirits” in Matthew 8:16 and Hebrews 1:14; “sons of God” in Psalm 29:1 and Psalm 89:6; “holy ones” in Psalm 89:5, 7 and Zechariah 14:5; “messengers” in Daniel 4:13 and Psalm 91:11; and “armies” or “hosts” in many places, including Psalm 148:2 and Daniel 8:10. According to Psalm 82, some of these spirits are assigned responsibility for nations on earth. Gabriel and Michael are prominent angelic leaders, especially serving God on behalf of his chosen people. Cherubim serve as guardians of God’s holiness, and seraphim minister before the throne of God.

Scripture tells us that all of the heavenly spirits were first created good, like the rest of creation. In 1 Timothy 5:21, those spirits who remain faithful by God’s grace are called “elect angels”. But other heavenly spirits rebel against God. We see this in passages like John 8:44; 1 Timothy 3:6; 2 Peter 2:4; and Jude 6. We don’t know much about this angelic rebellion, except that it is widespread, and Satan — and perhaps other spirits — rebelled before the temptation of Adam and Eve. Passages like Job 1:6-12; Psalm 82; and 2 Chronicles 18:18-22 indicate that Satan, the adversary — also called the Devil or the accuser — and other evil spirits called demons, rulers, authorities and powers continue to participate from time to time in the heavenly court. They serve at the bidding of the court of heaven and fulfill God’s will on earth, though with evil intent.

But Satan and other evil spirits won’t serve the court in heaven forever. Instead, a place of eternal judgment has been prepared for them in the netherworld, along with human beings who rebel against God.

**What we’re talking here is about the angelic world; we’re thinking about heaven and the inhabitants of heaven. But we’re also including in that the cosmic powers, namely the demonic powers, the fallen angels. And the truth is God has just as much authority over the fallen angels as he does over the good angels... And we sometimes think that the fallen angels have more freedom than the good angels, because the good angels are under God's absolute control in heaven and they serve him while the fallen angels get to do as much fun and as much mischief as they can down here on earth. But the Bible answer is very clear: God has complete authority over the fallen angels; everything that they do they do only because God has allowed it... And everything that Satan does, like if you look at Revelation 13:5-8, everything the Beast, the Antichrist, does during that final period of history, he does only because God has given him permission even to blaspheme the name of God. So, God is in total absolute control of the fallen world, and God is in absolute control of the heavenly world.**

**— Dr. Grant R. Osborne**

Now that we’ve considered the invisible dimensions of God’s creation, let’s turn to the visible dimensions of creation, the physical world of which you and I are a part.

## Visible Dimensions

We'll look at the biblical portrait of the visible dimensions of God's creation in the same way we viewed the invisible realms. First, we'll note the basic arrangement of the visible world. And second, we'll focus on the occupants of this world. Consider first the arrangement of the visible dimensions of creation.

As we said earlier, the Scriptures present all of creation as God's cosmic palace or temple. And throughout the centuries, systematic theologians have looked to the first chapters of Genesis to discern how God arranged the visible aspects of his palace. According to Genesis 1:2, the visible world was initially "formless and empty." But by the end of the first week, in Genesis 2:1-3, God completed the initial, pleasing arrangement of creation. And he rested on his heavenly throne. So, what was this initial arrangement of the visible world?

Well, we learn in Genesis 1 that on the first day, God established day and night, or light and darkness, in the visible realms of his palace. On the second day, God established the visible sky and seas. And on the third day, God established dry land and plant life on the floor of his cosmic palace.

**Well, as you look at the universe you see the incredible wisdom and power that God had in creating the universe. The design in everything is so fantastic, the distances and all. Our galaxies, we've got just hundreds of thousands of galaxies out there ... everything is so incredibly designed, and the wisdom of God just is so obvious and manifests itself. And God creates all these things, in a sense, out of nothing... The incredible wisdom and power is so obvious in all of creation, in the universe and all.**

— Dr. Frank Barker

With the arrangement of the visible world in mind, let's consider how the biblical account of God's work of creation also focuses on the occupants of the visible world.

Now, at times, the occupants of the invisible heavens appear in the visible world to serve the purposes of the divine King in heaven. And the Bible also reports numerous theophanies, or visible appearances of God himself in biblical history. He appeared to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He appeared in dreams and visions, and in the pillar of smoke and fire to Israel. And of course, as the New Testament teaches, God appeared through the incarnation of Christ and his earthly ministry.

But the first chapter of Genesis focuses primarily on the ordinarily-visible occupants of the physical world. For instance, on the first day, God had divided the light and darkness. Then later, on the fourth day, he placed the sun, moon and stars to occupy and govern the day and night. On the second day, God had established the visible sky and seas. Then, on the fifth day he created birds and sea creatures to inhabit them. On the third day God had established dry land and plant life. Then, on the sixth day, he placed animals and human beings there. All of these occupants of the visible world play important roles in God's purposes for his creation. But according to Genesis 1:26-31,

only humanity has the special role of being the image and likeness of God. Listen to the words of Genesis 1:28:

**God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).**

So what does it mean for humanity, both male and female, to be created in the image of God? There's been a lot of debate amongst theologians about what this actually means, but scholars in the Old Testament are aware of a find at Tell Fakhariyah in Syria where they found a statue of a ruler in that region, and it calls the statue "the image and likeness..." of that particular ruler. So what this shines light upon Genesis 1 is that, how humans, as God's image bearers, are those who are to be, if you will, like statues for God, or representatives for God being the real King of this world. So, when I think “image bearers,” I think those who are called to represent or to reflect God in this world as they care for creation.

— Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.

As the second chapter of Genesis explains, in the beginning God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This earthly sacred garden was so perfect, so beautiful, so holy, that God would appear regularly in his visible glory. But the goal of history was for the perfection, beauty and holiness of the garden to extend to the far reaches of the earth. In this way, it would be appropriate for God's visible glory to appear everywhere to his endless praise. And the primary instrument for this expansion of holiness and God's glory throughout the world was humanity — the image and likeness of God. By God's gracious empowerment, and the service of angels against every physical and spiritual foe, the redeemed of humanity were destined to fulfill history's purpose in service to God.

This is why Scripture and evangelical systematic theology place so much stress on the role of Christ as the perfect image and likeness of God. Not only did he pay for the sins of his redeemed people, but when Christ returns to make the new heavens and new earth, he will fill the earth with God's holy images and make all things new. God's visible glory will shine throughout the invisible *and* visible realms of creation so that every creature will worship God. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:10-11:

**At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).**

Having seen how the arrangements and occupants of creation set the stage for the works of God in history, we should turn to the unfolding of history under the providence of God.

## PROVIDENCE

The Latin theological term *providentia* speaks of God “attending to,” “sustaining,” or “taking care of” creation as he works out his eternal plan. As you can imagine, providence includes many different activities because it’s God’s sustaining power upholding all things, all of the time. Topics within systematic theology, other than theology proper, focus on particular aspects of God’s providence, especially how God attends to sin and salvation in history. But theology proper has typically focused on patterns of God’s providence that underlie all of history, the patterns that characterize every dimension of God’s care for his creation.

**The word "providence" actually comes from the Latin and means basically to see in advance or to see before, but it ultimately represents that God is overseeing, he is looking over, watching over, caring for all of creation... This concept of providence is tied in with a number of other important doctrines that I think Christians have unfortunately missed in terms of their appreciation for how God really does care for us. He cares for his creation... And that gives comfort. It gives a sense of God's goodness and that he's not a distant God, that he's not an angry God, that he's a God who delights to provide, that he's a God who knows what he's doing and who's moving everything according to his purposes and plans.**

— Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

Traditional systematic theologians have explored the patterns of God’s providence by relying on a distinction that we mentioned in an earlier lesson. On the one hand, they’ve referred to God as the First Cause, the ultimate cause behind everything that happens in history. And on the other hand, they’ve referred to various dimensions of creation as second causes — different facets of the invisible and visible realms that also cause events to occur in history.

Now, there are many things that could be said about this distinction in God’s work of providence. But for the sake of time, we’ll touch on just two aspects. First, we’ll note the importance of second causes. And second, we’ll look into the interaction between God and second causes. Let’s consider first the importance of second causes.

### Importance of Second Causes

It will help to begin with a portion of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* entitled “Of Providence.” In the fifth chapter, second paragraph, we read these words:

**Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by**



**the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.**

As we can see here, this paragraph begins by affirming what we've called centrist evangelical outlooks on the plan of God. It draws attention to the fact that "all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly," "in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause." As we discussed earlier, the Scriptures teach that every event in history accords with God's all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan. But all too often, followers of Christ fail to acknowledge what the *Confession* quickly adds here. It declares that God orders all things "to fall out, according to the nature of second causes." This expression reflects complex debates among medieval scholastic theologians that have continued even to our own day. The details of these debates are beyond the scope of our lesson. But we'll give a brief summary of the matter.

Throughout the centuries, a number of theologians and philosophers have argued that God is not simply the *first* Cause of all things, but the *one and only* Cause. It's as if every element in creation is a lifeless puppet and all historical events result from God acting directly on creation, as if he were the great Cosmic Puppeteer. In this view, if God does not directly and personally make things happen, then nothing happens. The earth revolves in its elliptical orbit around the sun solely because God causes it to move in this way. Trees grow tall because God personally causes them to grow. Animals walk about and fish swim in the sea only as God moves each one himself. And in this view, human beings and invisible spirits choose to do good and evil because God makes these choices for them.

Now, it's true that God sustains all of creation. As Paul put it in Acts 17:28, "In him we live and move and have our being." But as we're about to see, creation doesn't simply wait until God pulls strings to make things happen. Instead, the Scriptures teach that God has granted various capacities to different facets of creation so that they genuinely function as significant second causes of historical events.

**What do we mean when we say, for instance, in the *Westminster Confession*, that God is the primary cause of everything, but that he also makes use of, establishes, and affirms secondary causes. And so, the language is very carefully chosen to affirm that what people do matters; therefore, the word "cause" is put to it, but that God is ultimately sovereign, therefore "secondary" is put to it... God is the primary cause. The means of grace — preaching, Bible memory, sharing, evangelism, praying, the Lord's Supper, baptism — all of those things that God has put in place are secondary causes, which we embrace. So, we plant, we water, but God gives the increase. Every farmer understands this. A farmer puts the seed in, there's the soil, there's the seed, and now what's going to happen? He can't make it grow. Only God can make it grow. But God has given him the means that he is to use: secondary causes, plant and water.**

— Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

Listen to the way the *Confession* makes this clear by stressing three ways that aspects of creation function as historical causes. They do so “either necessarily, freely, or contingently.” Let’s unpack what this terminology means.

In the first place, we see the importance of second causes in history as they function “necessarily.” In brief, the term “necessarily” refers to the ways many aspects of God’s creation accomplish his purposes mechanically, or as we might say, by consistent laws of nature. The radiation of the sun necessarily warms the earth. The gravitational force of the earth causes objects to fall to the ground. Chemical reactions cause particular results. Involuntary biological processes have predictable, mechanical effects. The list goes on and on. Much like Genesis 8:22 speaks of the predictable cycles of day and night, cold and heat, summer and winter, God has arranged creation so that countless second causes move history toward his goals through necessary interconnections.

In the second place, as vital as necessary or mechanical functions of second causes are, they also cause things to occur “freely.”

The term “freely” refers to functions of second causes that are not mechanical. Second causes act “freely,” in the sense that the outcomes of their actions are not necessarily what the second causes intended. God is fully in control of the outcomes, but from the perspective of second causes, many effects of their actions are random, inadvertent, or perhaps even accidental. For instance, passages like Exodus 21:13 speak of unintentional sins. 1 Kings 22:29-34 speaks of a time when king Ahab was struck by an arrow shot “at random.” The Scriptures frequently acknowledge that the free or unintended consequences of second causes are often very significant in God’s providence.

In the third place, the *Confession* notes that second causes function within God’s providence not only necessarily and freely, but also “contingently.” The term “contingently” refers to the ways that the intentional choices of human beings and spirits cause things to happen in history. Now, God knows all things and, in this sense, there are no contingencies from his divine perspective. But the Scriptures stress over and over that the contingent choices of God’s volitional creatures shape the course of history. In Genesis 2:17, God warned Adam that he would suffer death if he ate the forbidden fruit. And the results of his contingent choice have influenced every facet of history. In fact, human choice is central even in obtaining eternal salvation from the curse of sin. As Paul put it in Romans 10:9, we will be saved, “*if*” we declare that Jesus is Lord and “*if*” we believe that God raised him from the dead.

In reality, in any given circumstance, the importance of second causes appears in some combination of all three functions. God orchestrates history so that second causes impact the course of history, necessarily, freely *and* contingently.

Keeping the importance of second causes in God’s providence in view, we’re now in a position to consider the interactions between God and second causes. How is it that God engages the second causes he has created as he works out his plan for history? What patterns emerge as we survey the Scriptures?

## God and Second Causes

The third paragraph of the fifth chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* addresses this question in a very helpful way. There we read:

**God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.**

It would be difficult to overemphasize the last phrase of this paragraph. God interacts with second causes “at his pleasure.” He does with them what he wishes, when he wishes and how he wishes. God is not constrained to work one way or another with second causes. Even so, this portion of the *Confession* makes an important distinction between God’s “ordinary providence” and how he is “free” to act in extraordinary ways with second causes.

In looking at God and second causes, it will help to unpack this distinction a bit. So, let’s look first at God’s ordinary providence. And then we’ll turn to his extraordinary providence. Let’s start with ordinary providence.

**Ordinary Providence.** One kind of interaction ordinarily characterizes God’s engagements with second causes. As the *Confession* puts it, God makes use of means. Or to put it another way, God ordinarily works through the second causes he has created.

We can see this easily in the realm of the visible world. How does God nourish plants? Ordinarily, he does this through nutrients that are in the soil, through water and sunlight. How does God keep human beings alive? Usually, he employs food, oxygen, water and the like. In fact, the Scriptures make it clear that God even spreads the saving work of Christ throughout the world by making use of second causes. Listen to the way Romans 10:14-15 describes the ordinary way in which people come to faith in Christ:

**How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? (Romans 10:14-15).**

But God doesn’t merely employ visible second causes in his ordinary providence. Throughout the Scriptures we find that God also makes use of invisible second causes: angels, demons and even Satan himself. As we read in Psalm 103:20-21:

**Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will (Psalm 103:20-21).**

There are countless implications of the fact that God ordinarily makes use of visible and invisible second causes as he interacts with creation. But systematic theologians often turn to the subject of theodicy: the vindication of God’s goodness in view of the existence of evil. Understanding how God carries out his plan *through* second

causes helps us grasp how God can be holy and good when evil exists in his creation. God's ordinary providence sheds light on this subject in at least two ways.

In the first place, the Scriptures are clear that God is sovereign over evil. It is fully under his control. Passages like Job 1:6-12 indicate that God employs Satan in his service from his heavenly throne. And as Jesus explained to Peter in Luke 22:31-32:

**Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail (Luke 22:31-32).**

This is why, in Matthew 6:13, Jesus taught his disciples to pray in this way:

**Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:13).**

As Jesus' words here indicate, we are to pray that God will deliver us from the evil one because God is in control of him.

**When we study different aspects of the divine powers in the Bible, we discover that probably Satan is the second most powerful person. But, it's a great counsel to me that he's not omnipresent, he's not omniscient, he's not omni anything... He's not like God. He's unlike God. It's not that God and Satan exist in equal power and they throw one punch here, one punch over here, at the same time just kind of fighting over. No, Satan is nowhere in comes close to who God is... we discover that often time he's defeated just ... by prayers of the believers and their power, or the unity among the believers — all different ways the Bible describes that, how Satan can be put aside. And the Holy Spirit resists him that he's not able to function. So, yes, he's powerful, but he's limited in a great sense, and nothing comes close to even the power of God.**

**— Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia**

But while God, in the first place, is completely sovereign over evil, in the second place, God's ordinary providence indicates that God himself never *causes* evil. Rather, temptations come indirectly through evil second causes. Listen to the way James 1:13 makes this perspective clear:

**Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one (James 1:13, ESV).**

Notice here that James says we should not blame temptation on God for two reasons. On the one side, "God cannot be tempted with evil" because God is good, and evil does not entice him in any way. And on the other side, "[God] himself tempts no one." This literal translation rightly highlights what is explicit in the Greek text. "God

himself” *does not tempt*. In other words, God does not directly tempt us toward evil. Rather he does this through preternatural creatures like Satan and his demons. And, as James also notes in 1:14, temptation is successful because of the evil propensities of human second causes. James wrote:

**Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire (James 1:14, ESV).**

Temptations are successful because of our own evil longings. In the end, God’s ordinary use of second causes explains how God is sovereign over evil, but not the author of evil. While all things fall out according to his eternal plan, the responsibility of evil rests on preternatural and natural second causes that rebel against the commands of the One who made them.

In addition to stressing how God makes use of second causes in his ordinary providence, we must be sure to acknowledge God’s extraordinary providence as well.

***Extraordinary Providence.*** As chapter five, paragraph three of the *Confession* puts it, God is also “free to work without, above, and against [means], at his pleasure.” In effect, the *Confession* indicates that God engages his creation in extraordinary ways, in ways that we often call divine interventions, or even miracles. Sometimes he causes events to occur “without” the use of second causes. In other words, he does things directly in history. At other times, God causes things to occur in history that are “above” second causes. Meaning, he goes beyond the normal effects of second causes. And at other times, God also works “against” second causes. In other words, God reverses the ordinary results of second causes, especially as he brings good out of evil.

The Bible highlights many examples of extraordinary providence, times when God causes things to happen in history without, above and against second causes. In the Old Testament, these extraordinary acts of providence were often designed as signs to vindicate the authority of God’s representatives like kings, prophets and priests. In the New Testament extraordinary providence often testifies to the authority of Jesus and his first century apostles and prophets. But unusual or extraordinary providence also includes other dramatic displays of God’s blessings and judgments, even when they are not closely associated with the authority of God’s special servants.

Even in our own day, God is always free to do things in ways that we do not expect. To be sure, when we examine our world, we see God’s ordinary providence at every turn. And we should be grateful for the ways he makes use of second causes every day of our lives. But at the same time, faithful followers of Christ should expect to experience God’s extraordinary providence as well. When the second causes that God ordinarily uses in our lives fail, we should turn to God himself, just as his faithful people have done throughout the centuries. We should call out for his extraordinary intervention into history, because he always remains free to work without, above and against every facet of creation. Nothing can withstand him.

## CONCLUSION

---

In this lesson on the “Plan and Works of God,” we’ve explored how systematic theology has dealt with the plan of God from both biblical perspectives and a variety of theological positions. God has an all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan by which he orders all of history. But he also makes many limited, temporal and changing plans as he interacts moment by moment with his creation. And, we’ve also explored how systematic theologians refer to the works of God in creation and providence. God formed both the visible and invisible dimensions of his creation and he sustains them all by his ordinary and extraordinary providence so that they fulfill all of his good pleasure and bring him endless glory.

Traditional systematic theologians have provided helpful ways of organizing many different biblical teachings about God as they deal with the plan and works of God. But more than this, what we’ve seen about these topics in this lesson also provides you and me with immeasurably valuable practical guidance for our daily lives. Whether we enjoy the wonders of God’s blessings or the trials of suffering in our fallen world, what the Scriptures teach about God’s plan and his works strengthens us and leads us into faithful service to Christ and his kingdom.

---

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams (Host)** is Associate Pastor at Grace and Peace Fellowship in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Williams earned his M.Div. at Chesapeake Theological Seminary and his D.Min. at Covenant Theological Seminary. Before joining Grace and Peace Fellowship, Dr. Williams was Senior Pastor of New Song Community Church in Baltimore, MD. He also served as Minister of Outreach and Youth at Faith Christian Fellowship Church and was Co-Area Director with Young Life.

---

**Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.** is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College & Graduate School.

**Dr. Frank Barker** is Pastor Emeritus at Briarwood Presbyterian Church and is a founder of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia** is Founder and President of North India Institute of Theological Studies in Chandigarh, India.

**Dr. D.A. Carson** is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Co-founder of The Gospel Coalition.

**Rev. Larry Cockrell** is Senior Pastor of Household of Faith Church and faculty member of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo** is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

**Dr. Scott Manor** is Assistant Professor of Historical Theology, Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Dean of Faculty at Knox Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Grant R. Osborne** is Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Harry L. Reeder III** is Senior Pastor at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, AL.

**Dr. Steven C. Roy** is Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Philip Ryken** is President of Wheaton College.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler** is resident faculty member of Theological and Historical Studies at East Asia School of Theology.

# We Believe in God

LESSON  
FOUR

## God's Plan and Works Faculty Forum



Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

For videos, study guides and other resources, visit Third Millennium Ministries at [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).



© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### **ABOUT THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES**

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Third Millennium has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Third Millennium Ministries is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org)

# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	What is divine immanence? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	What is divine transcendence? .....	2
<b>Question 3:</b>	Why is it important to balance both God's transcendence and his immanence in the doctrine of God? .....	3
<b>Question 4:</b>	Must God's eternal plan also be immutable? .....	4
<b>Question 5:</b>	How can we avoid fatalism if God has an eternal plan for his world? .....	5
<b>Question 6:</b>	How should believers evaluate the teachings of open theology? .....	6
<b>Question 7:</b>	How is it possible for God to know the future? .....	7
<b>Question 8:</b>	How significant is the debate between differing views on the order of divine decrees? .....	8
<b>Question 9:</b>	What is divine foreknowledge? .....	9
<b>Question 10:</b>	Where do you stand on the debate over the role of God's foreknowledge in the salvation of sinners? .....	10
<b>Question 11:</b>	What is the value of the doctrine of God's eternal plan, counsel or decree for systematic theology? .....	12
<b>Question 12:</b>	Why is God's glory so pervasive in the Bible? .....	13
<b>Question 13:</b>	What do theologians mean by the providence of God? .....	14
<b>Question 14:</b>	What do theologians mean when they say that God often operates through second causes? .....	15
<b>Question 15:</b>	Is there any aspect of God's creation that is outside the realm of God's authority or sovereignty? .....	16
<b>Question 16:</b>	What power does Satan have in this world? .....	17
<b>Question 17:</b>	What aspects of God's extraordinary providence can we call miracles? .....	18

# We Believe in God

## Lesson Four: God's Plan and Works

### Faculty Forum

With

Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.  
Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.  
Dr. Bruce Baugus  
Dr. Rick Boyd  
Dr. D. A. Carson  
Dr. William Edgar  
Dr. Bruce L. Fields  
Dr. Benjamin Gladd  
Rev. Dan Hendley

Rev. Clete Hux  
Dr. Glenn R. Kreider  
Dr. Samuel Lamerson  
Dr. Richard Lints  
Dr. Scott Manor  
Dr. Josh Moody  
Dr. Grant R. Osborne  
Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Dr. Scott Redd  
Dr. Ramesh Richard  
Dr. Philip Ryken  
Dr. Tim Sansbury  
Rev. George Shamblin  
Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry  
Dr. Carl R. Trueman  
Dr. Sanders L. Willson  
Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

### Question 1:

### What is divine immanence?

#### Dr. Bruce L. Fields

Divine immanence, I begin with the understanding that God is Spirit. The Lord Jesus' words from John 4:24, giving some indication of the nature of God's existence... But being Spirit, he is able to be everywhere. And, you know, Psalm 139, for example, reaffirms this, particularly in, I think, verses 7-10. You know, God just being everywhere: "Can I depart from your Spirit?" and the like... I find John Frame's terminology helpful in maintaining a proper understanding of immanence. God is with us, but he not with us to the degree or to the extent that we can collapse him into all that there is, whereby we say God is everything and everything is God. Frame's term is "covenant solidarity." The idea that God is with us in solidarity, he is present, he is a constant companion, a comforter, strengthener, these kinds of things, but the covenant dimension would also bring into the realm of understanding that he *is*. He remains who he is and is this relational God, but near us, but also maintaining all that he is. With us, but he still sets the tone for things. So, God is everywhere, but we don't want to collapse it into a kind of monistic understanding, and I find Frame's terminology and conceptual framework a very, very helpful one.

#### Dr. Rick Boyd

A very difficult concept for us to understand, we can't fully grasp it, in fact very much like transcendence would be, is the immanence of God and the fact that God can be everywhere. Because he is transcendent ... he's not a part of creation; he created everything. He is also able to be everywhere, not just everywhere, but at every time. He is immanent. He is... You can't escape him. Psalm 139 talks about that very thing, the psalmist wanting to run, and there's nowhere to hide from the Spirit of God. God is everywhere and at every time. That's who he is.

## **Question 2:**

### **What is divine transcendence?**

#### **Dr. Philip Ryken**

When theologians talk about the transcendence of God, they are speaking about how high and exalted and lofty and lifted up God is, how far above us he is. And this is a frequent theme in Scripture. I mean, “Who can ascend the hill of the Lord?” Or the language of the Psalms, which refers to the high and holy One? Or even the experience of someone like Moses who wanted to see God and couldn’t see God because that was too glorious for him. So, when we talk about the transcendence of God, we’re talking about all of the things that make God exalted and lofty and far above us.

#### **Dr. Scott Manor**

Divine transcendence is the concept that God is beyond our full understanding, something that goes outside of what we’re able to fully comprehend. In a lot of people’s minds there’s the sense that transcendence means that he sort of transcends in the sense of he’s “up there,” that he’s out there, that he’s above us somewhere. I think that the true meaning of transcendence isn’t so much that he’s above us looking down on us, but that he transcends our own ability to think about him properly because he’s outside of our cognitive abilities, the way that we think about things. And so, certain theologians have used terms like “qualitatively distinct,” infinitely so, infinitely qualitatively distinct from us. And so, in that sense, “transcendence” is not so much that he’s up there, up in the sky looking down on us, but that he’s able to go beyond what we’re able to think of in terms of who God is.

#### **Dr. Benjamin Gladd**

Divine transcendence is God’s “otherness.” I can best illustrate this probably by using the book of Revelation. In Revelation, God only speaks a couple times. It’s pretty remarkable. Here you have this apocalypse, this vision, series of visions, but God doesn’t speak. And so here you have these visions of just the throne and descriptions of what that’s like, but God does not utter a word, or rarely does he utter a word. Conversely, here you have the Son of Man walking in the midst of the lampstands; you have immanence and you have transcendence, both sort of on the opposite ends of the spectrum. God is completely other than creation, and yet you have the Son of Man who is incarnate but yet who is victorious, and he is very much with the churches and knows them intimately and walks among them. In fact, he’s even called the “Son of Man” — very immanent.

**Question 3:****Why is it important to balance both God's transcendence and his immanence in the doctrine of God?****Dr. Josh Moody**

When we think of the immanence of God, as when we think of the transcendence of God, we need to first of all realize that we're referencing something that is related to who God is himself. However, when we're talking about the immanence of God, as opposed to when we're talking about the transcendence of God, we are describing God as not above and beyond everything in every aspect of his creation, but as God who is here, by his Spirit present. Now those two aspects of God, his transcendence and his immanence, are important to keep in balance and in coordinated conversation with each other theologically. It is possible to argue that right at the very nature of heresy is a tendency to either elevate one or the other. So, you could say that deists — who view God as distant and the unmoved mover, the one who began everything and started everything but not really involved — have over-elevated the transcendence of God; whereas, those who worship the god of rock and river and tree have misunderstood the immanence of God. Right in the nature of God is this mysterious reality that he is both above and beyond and yet here and present. And the right locus for this mysterious reality is, according to Scripture, I would say, ultimately the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit — God who is Father and yet who is Son and yet who is Spirit, three in one. And there are ways that we could talk about that reality, discuss it, describe it in scriptural terms, but in its essence, it is still a mystery. And so, with this doctrine of who God is, both his transcendence and his immanence, it should lead us to worship, with the transcendence to awe, with the immanence to wonder, that this God who is so great also loves me and us.

**Dr. Bruce L. Fields**

The way I would understand divine transcendence in terms of a basic statement would be God's ability to maintain his own existence, his own excellence apart from the created realm. He's not dependent upon creation; he's not dependent upon any element of creation for the maintenance of his own existence. But at the same time, in acknowledging what transcendence is, it can sometimes be misunderstood or misapplied, stressing, for example, too much of his total otherness, to detach God from all that there is and to say things like "he's unknowable" or "there's no language that we can use to describe him," which to a certain extent has a certain degree of truth, but it's how you apply it. I think that a helpful term that I've uncovered over the years that nicely brings some things together is a term used by John Frame to talk about God's transcendence, divine transcendence. It's his "covenant headship." "Headship" implies God is, God remains, he maintains himself in all that he is, independent of all that there is in creation, but "covenant" brings in the reality that this God nonetheless chooses to engage in relationships. He is the initiator; he is the inviter; he is the governor of the relationships; he does not reduce himself to dependence upon the people he is in relation with or whatever he is in relation is. He

maintains who he is, thus he maintains his headship, but he chooses to engage in relationships.

### **Question 4:**

### **Must God's eternal plan also be immutable?**

#### **Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

God's eternal plan must be immutable for a number of reasons. One, God himself is eternal and unchanging, and therefore any plan that arises out of his nature must also partake of being unchangeable. Secondly, the prophecies of the Old Testament; God cannot deliver on his promises if he doesn't already know and control the way that history is flowing. If God changes his mind, then his promises in the Old Testament are hollow promises. Thirdly, that leads to a distinct pastoral point. The immutability of God and the immutability of God's purposes is a vital pastoral doctrine, because it's only if we know that God's plan is absolutely reliable, it's only if we know that God does not change, that he will always fight for his people, that he will always fulfill his promises for his people, it's only if we know that that we can actually preach the gospel with confidence or apply it from one believer to another. So, I would say for biblical, theological and pastoral reasons, God's plan must be immutable.

#### **Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

It's important to understand the plan of God needs to be immutable because it's linked inherently to his character — his trustworthiness, his faithfulness. If God's plan is kind of hanging in the balance or contingent... There are theologians who try to teach the openness of God. This idea that God somehow, he doesn't know the future, he can kind of guess it well, but that's, he's in time, he's bound by time, and, therefore, he does not actually have the ability to know *exactly* what's going to happen next. That's a fascinating, I might call it heresy, because it clearly speaks against the concept that God is infinite. He is eternal; he is the author of time. This is suggested in Jude, at the end of Jude where it says, "before all time, now [in time] and forever" — in the eternal time sense — that there are eternal purposes and plans that God is working out in time, our time, but that God stands beyond time. I remember C.S. Lewis describing it as God is like the page that the timeline sits on. He is not bound in time or stands in somehow a relation to time that is inescapable. So, in fact, God, though he intersects time, he intersects time at every time, simultaneously in this sense. We don't experience time that way, but God in his eternity experiences time at every point. So, obviously he has to know what is going to happen in the future. He knows what happened in the past. He knows what's happening now, and he knows how to work everything according to the purposes and plans of his counsel. So, he doesn't worry about things. God doesn't sit back and bite his fingernails over what might come next. He was never surprised that the coming of Christ and the unveiling of Jesus in flesh was somehow going to end up with him being crucified on a cross. That was, it seems catastrophic from a human perspective, but from God's divine

purpose and plan, it became the greatest event of history where God was able to take the most wicked thing that could ever possibly occur and make it into the most glorious and redemptive event for all time and space. So, the concept of God's immutable plan is so much tied to who he is and his ability, his authority, his omnipotent power to be able to achieve exactly what he purposes and plans to achieve in this time, in past time, and in the future.

### **Question 5:**

#### **How can we avoid fatalism if God has an eternal plan for his world?**

##### **Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.**

The Bible does tell us that God has a plan, tells us God is sovereign. You see things like Ephesians 1:11 that talks about God doing everything according to the counsel of his will. For some people, that makes them think, "Wow, am I just a puppet?" I always say, "Hey, look at the back of your hand. Do you see any wires going into the back of your hands that says you're a puppet or a marionette?" No, you don't, and what you do also see is throughout the Bible, how does God treat human beings? He treats human beings like responsible persons, people for whom things that they do, if you will, you have to answer for what you do, in other words, not necessarily always in a bad way. But the point is that there is a responsibility, saying that, the things that we do, there is significance to it, those things matter, we're not just like pieces on some game board being moved around by some divine puppeteer. So I think that's very important for one thing. Second, we are to ask ourselves, what is the purpose of God telling us about having a plan for everything? The purpose about having a plan is not so that God handcuffs us and says, "Okay, just sit around and just let my plan go forth," it's kind of like you being moved around again like a puppet. No, it's there so that we are comforted by the fact that whatever's going on in the world, particularly things that are out of our control, perhaps horrible things, it reminds us that no matter how bad things are, God really is in control of history and we can be comforted by that. The other thing is when it's talked about in terms of salvation, the point is not then for us to sit around and say, "God will save the people that he's going to save, and it'll just happen without me doing anything." No. The point is, is that he's telling us, "Look, God has a plan, you're a participant in this plan. Aren't you glad you're a participant in that plan?" That's the reason for it, not for making us feel like our lives are meaningless or that we are puppets... There's one other very important dimension about this, which is the fact that, you know, the Bible does not give us any neat resolution to the tension between God being the one that plans everything and God also being the one that asks us to do things or commands us to do things and holds us responsible for how we respond to what he asks us to do or how we obey or disobey those commands. So, what's important to recognize is that you've got that tension, it's unresolved, but God tells us over and over again about how his ways are not our ways. So this is one of those ways that we see the difference between God and how he does things and the ways that we do things. It's something that reminds us of our limitations as human beings... The Bible never says anywhere that we are puppets. It



says we're responsible beings and reminds us about God being sovereign, primarily for our comfort and also so that we can praise him when we recognize that we're part of his great plan.

**Dr. D. A. Carson**

I think there are at least two things that help us conceptualize these matters in a fashion faithful to Scripture. One is that although the Bible depicts God as standing sovereign over all things, behind all things, in some ways controlling all things, yet the Scriptures equally insist that he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically... Another way of putting it is that there are two huge principles that always remain true in Scripture, and you've got to believe both of them at the same time. One is God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty doesn't mitigate human responsibility. In other words, we're not simply machines. And the second principle is human beings are morally responsible creatures, that is, we believe, we disbelieve, we obey, we disobey, we choose, and those choices are morally significant, but such moral accountability never makes God absolutely contingent. And you've got to believe both of those at the same time. There are many, many passages that speak to that. If you hold that both of those principles are contingent, you hold that they are compatible, so the position is often called "compatibilism," and that, it seems to me, is one of the axioms of Scripture that surface again and again.

**Question 6:**

**How should believers evaluate the teachings of open theology?**

**Dr. Grant R. Osborne**

Basically open theology is a radical Arminian position. By what I mean by that is Arminianism says that we make choices and that God has given us the power of choice and that choices are part of how we experience God. The problem is, open theism says that God has given us radical choice, and that God has even restricted his own knowledge and in a sense his own infallibility by refusing to fiddle with our choices. In that, the problem is that open theism, therefore, makes our choices the final arbiter in our salvation and even in our relationships with God, and that becomes very dangerous. God is absolutely sovereign, and that is a position that Arminians as well as Calvinists hold. That is a position that is absolutely clear in Scripture; God is completely sovereign ... and our choice does not subvert his will.

**Dr. William Edgar**

There's a movement that had some force a few years ago called "open theism," and their problem was — and you sympathize with this — how could we be significant, and how could we be responsible if God not only determines everything but knows everything ahead? So, they began to chip away at God's knowledge of the future. And of course, in the bargain they destroyed real comfort because who wants a God who can't help and know things. What they should have done is to say that while God knows the future, he also is good and secures us into that future in a way that the



future is not an unknown, a scary place to go. The future is what God wants it to be. Jesus told his disciples, you know, when he goes away, God will provide a house for them, or “many mansions,” where there will be places and rooms for everyone. So, he said that, not because he was hoping that was true, but because he knew it was true. It was true. It’s going to be true because of his death and resurrection. And that kind of knowledge of the future is tremendously comforting. They may have had to go through suffering in the meantime — they all did, many of them were martyred — but they were going to that mansion. So, the fact that God knows the future is philosophically true, it’s tied to his being, he plans it, but it’s also true pastorally. It’s a great comfort to know that he knows the future and that, whatever I’m going through now, his promises will come true.

### **Question 7:**

#### **How is it possible for God to know the future?**

##### **Dr. Sanders L. Willson**

There’s only one way that a being can know the future, and that is that he decrees and governs the future, or I suppose that the one who does govern the future reveals the future. So, prophets can know the future because the one in control of history reveals it to them. That’s the only way anybody can possibly know the future; it has to come from the hands of the one who makes the future. So, the fact that God knows the future tells you that he orders the future. So, those who want to think of God as just knowing something ahead but not ordering it I think really need to rethink that. That suggests there’s another god who’s ordering the future and that the God we worship is only finding out about the future rather than ordering it. So the only way he can know it is because he brings it to pass.

##### **Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

When we think about the future and God’s knowledge, often it’s tempting for us to think of it in terms of the way we think about the future. We look at the future and we think, well, we don’t know what’s going to happen even in the next few minutes, so how does God think about, or predict, or know what will happen in the future? But in many ways you’re asking the wrong question because you’re coming at it from a human perspective. We are finite and in time. We have a beginning and there’s a sense in which our lives will come to an end and we’ll have a new kind of existence in eternity, but ultimately, God’s knowledge is comprehensive, not just in the fact that he knows everything that happened and everything that’s happening, he knows everything in the future because his knowledge is eternal, and his knowledge is total and comprehensive. We may talk about it in this way, that when we live in time we tend to think of things like a timeline, that we’re on a line where events are unfolding. But God is not on the timeline in the sense that we understand it... It’s really quite hard to imagine that when we begin to try to think of it from our perspective. But God knowing the future is the fact that he knows because he’s already, in a sense, there. And we have a hard time grasping that, because we don’t live with that kind of

infinite knowledge; we don't have that kind of comprehensive capacity that God in his infinitude possesses.

**Dr. Richard Lints**

God knows the past, the present and the future, because God is God, a way of saying that God's present experience is not bounded by time. God knows the future for at least two reasons. One that he creates everything that is, and in his creativeness knows what will take place. Secondly, God's omniscience asks of us to believe, affirm that the future events are true even now or not, and if God knows everything, God knows whether those future events in our experience are true or not. Now, to speak more concretely about God's knowledge of the future is to speak about our trust that God's designs for the future will come to pass. So it is, at the end of the day, a trust we have, an assurance we have that the future will work according to God's design, God's plan, and therein lies our hope.

**Question 8:**

**How significant is the debate between differing views on the order of divine decrees?**

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

When systematic theologians talk about the order of the eternal decrees of God, they face at least two big problems. The first big problem is this: these are *eternal decrees*. And so we're not talking about something that God does in sequence or that God does one thing before another, before another, before another. Instead, the way it's usually described is that these are the logical connections among various things that God planned in all eternity to see unfold in history. But the problem that systematic theologians face when they talk this way is just how mysterious the concept of eternity is. What is eternity? Is eternity timelessness? Or is eternity endless time? I think the best way to talk about God as eternal is just simply to say that he is not limited by time. And so, if we go beyond that in our definition of eternity, that God is beyond time or not confined to time or not limited by time, if we go beyond that, then I think we're going beyond things that the Bible tells us. And so, when you talk about an order of something in eternity, you are dealing with something that is very, very mysterious. That's one of the big problems that systematic theologians have when they discuss all of these matters. But there's second issue that always needs to be kept in mind too. The reason these various views on the eternal decrees of God and their order occurred in the history of the church is because of secondary theological issues. People come to this question with agenda. They have certain beliefs that are important to them that they want to see reflected and protected in the way they talk about the eternal decrees of God. I mean, if you are a person, a Christian who believes that God loves everyone equally, for example, well then you're going to have to talk about the eternal decrees of God in a way that accommodates that. If you're a Christian that doesn't believe that God loves everybody equally, then you're going to shape your idea of the eternal decrees in ways that accommodate that. If you

believe that salvation is genuinely offered to everyone, then you're going to shape your view of the eternal decrees to accommodate that. If you don't believe that the salvation in Christ is offered to everyone genuinely, then you're going to shape your view of the eternal decrees because of that. There are these and many other sort of secondary theological issues that influence the way people create their list of the order of the decrees of God. And so, as you're dealing with this matter, we all need to be very humble. We need to realize that we're limited, that we're dealing with eternity that's very mysterious, and we also need to be humble in the sense that we're shaping our views on these things according to a host of other beliefs that we have that we're sometimes not even aware of.

**Dr. Tim Sansbury**

So, theologians are doing good work when they ask questions about hard things and when they push and probe and poke at the mysteries that God has left behind. And so, it's good for us to wonder about the order of the divine decrees and to wonder about, you know, what did God do first, and what did he do afterwards, because it helps to expose new questions and good things that we need to answer. But, in my opinion, this is one of those areas where the difference of opinion in the ways that neither or none of the answers work exposes the fact that we've pushed too far. And for me, in particular, I think it comes out of a lack of comprehension of what we're saying in other parts of our theology when we say that God is eternal and God is outside of our before and after, and he's not limited the way we are to "first I do that, and then I do this, and then I do the other thing," and that what we should be getting out of that discussion is realizing that we've reached one of those places where we've come to the end of what we're able to say about God. And since God has not chosen to say this about himself, when we push the argument to the point of division and frustration and fights, in my opinion, it's inappropriate behavior, it's an unwillingness, it's an arrogance, it's us not being willing to let go of the idea that we ought to be able to figure everything out.

**Question 9:**

**What is divine foreknowledge?**

**Dr. Philip Ryken**

Part of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is God's foreknowledge, his knowledge of things in advance before they even happen. And this is one of the great mysteries of the character of God. To me this is one of the things that really causes us to worship God for who he is, to realize here's a God who knows the end from the beginning. But when we use the term "foreknowledge" in its biblical sense, it's not just that God knows in advance what's going to happen, but he actually has an intention and a purpose. And foreknowledge, typically, in the Bible is used in the context of our salvation. Who are the people that God foreknows? It's the people that he has a saving plan that he would redeem us in Jesus Christ. And so, the doctrine of the foreknowledge of God, I think, is a doctrine that leads to worship just because it

shows how amazing the mind of God is, but it's also a doctrine that leads to humility and gratitude, that God has a loving purpose for us in Jesus Christ that goes back before the beginning of time.

**Dr. Josh Moody**

When we talk about God foreknowing, or the divine foreknowledge, we are discussing two elements primarily. One would be what the word itself means. So, what we're saying is God has foreknown, that is, he has known beforehand, and we are saying that God knows everything. Now, biblically, we're not only saying that he foreknows everything; I would argue we're also saying that he is in control of everything, past, present, and future as the sovereign Lord over every aspect. Not a sparrow falls to the ground but that he knows it, as Jesus put it. And so he is completely in control... The other aspect we're talking about is the concept of knowledge as intimacy. So, when Paul talks about how God has known us, the knowledge that he seems to be referring to comes from the Old Testament understanding of knowledge, which is really intimacy, even husband and wife kind of intimacy. So we mustn't keep those two things at a distance from each other. And a lot of the controversy over exactly what does God foreknow and how does he predict it, leaves aside the other element which is that God's foreknowledge of us is the knowledge of a lover. It's that kind of knowledge — from “since from before the creation of the world he has known us” — and so we're not just a twinkle in his eye if we're his child, we're his loved, known entity from eternity past to eternity future.

**Rev. George Shamblin**

In the New Testament we come across different words that will describe what God does in the future as we know it. One of those words is “foreknowledge.” There's no question whatsoever that God foreknows everything that's going to happen in the future... He's not bound by the bookends of time, as we know it. So God definitely foreknows the future because he's already there... Not only does God foreknow, the Scripture is going to tell us in, like, Ephesians 1, that God predestines, we could even say *predetermines* things that happen in the future... So foreknowledge, the New Testament absolutely talks about, but it's taken a step further. Not only does he foreknow, but he predetermines, predestines everything that will happen.

**Question 10:**

**Where do you stand on the debate over the role of God's foreknowledge in the salvation of sinners?**

**Dr. Grant R. Osborne**

Obviously that is one of the more debated questions, whether foreknowledge is the basis of election or whether it is synonymous with election. And many of my colleagues and my friends who are more what we call Calvinistic, that is, they believe more in God's absolute predestination, believe that foreknowledge is a synonym for predestination. I believe that it is not. I believe that God's foreknowledge is what God

has known about history beforehand, that God created this world; he created this world knowing that this world was to fall into sin. And so, therefore, when God created this world, he created this world knowing that Christ would have to come and that mankind would be headed for eternal damnation unless Christ paid the price for them. The question is, whether in all of that God has determined ahead of time who is to be saved and who is not to be saved, or whether God gave choice to humanity ... so that within that standpoint, foreknowledge is God's knowledge of how people would respond to the convicting presence of the Holy Spirit and whether they would open their hearts. And it's very important to understand we do not save ourselves. We who are called Arminians, and I am one who would be called an Arminian, which means that we believe that there is choice and that God's election is based upon the Spirit's conviction, we do not believe that we save ourselves. Faith is not a work, and so faith is how we respond, then, to the Holy Spirit's presence in us, and, therefore, that is what God foreknows, namely, our response to the Holy Spirit. And then God produces his salvation in us.

**Dr. D. A. Carson**

It really is important to see that in the most crucial passage where foreknowledge is mentioned, namely Romans 8, the text does not say that God foreknows what will happen but foreknows us; he foreknows the people themselves. And most scholars who look at those things from within the Reformed heritage understand rightly, in my view, that this is akin to knowledge of human beings that you get between a husband and wife, between God and his people. God not only knows his people, he foreknows them because he's the God who actually is before all things and stands over time. He himself is outside the time, space continuum. So, he not only knows us but foreknows us. In that sense you cannot appeal, it seems to me, to the foreknowledge of God to ground for ordination in a kind of conditional dependence on human decision in which God has had no say.

**Dr. Rick Boyd**

Well, we know from the very beginning that freedom to choose is a part of God's very good creation. It came into being before sin ever entered in. So, he gives us complete freedom of choice. And yet, because of his transcendence, he's able to know what's going to happen, and we know that God's character, his very nature, is good. He is completely good. So, putting these pieces together, we understand that, because he's good and because he is God, he extends beyond creation — he's well beyond that — he is able to see the choices that we make and still order things to accomplish his ultimate will which is what he desires. So, God's will is accomplished in a way that is foreordained, even with the freedom we have to choose.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

As a Reformed theologian, I am very concerned to exclude all grounds of boasting in my salvation... And for this reason, Reformed theologians have consistently excluded the possibility that God's foreknowledge is based on foresight because of what it does to the decree, because of what it does to his act of foreordaining whatsoever comes to pass, making it conditioned upon me and which would mean that his choice of me in

Christ was conditioned upon him foreseeing what I do in terms of choosing him or accepting him or not. And I know that in me is no good thing, and I would have never received Christ if it wasn't for the fact that God himself, or nothing that's good in me, or nothing that I actually do or achieve of my own free will, left to my own devices, but rather it's by grace and by grace alone, and unaccountable or unexplainable grace from my perspective from beginning to end.

### **Question 11:**

#### **What is the value of the doctrine of God's eternal plan, counsel or decree for systematic theology?**

##### **Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.**

The doctrine of God's eternal decree is essential to our understanding of systematic theology, because it is this doctrine that helps us define and explain the sovereignty of God, that God has decreed all things whatsoever come to pass. There is nothing that surprises God. These things happen because of God's decree. Of course, the subsets of that and the ways he works out his decree are through his works of creation and providence. And so the way he created the world, the attributes that he has given the world, and the way that he sustains the world and keeps it being what it is; the earth stays the earth, it keeps spinning in the same direction, all of these things stay the way they are by God's eternal decree. And in his works of providence, the way that God works within the lives of his people and within his creation in order to cause them to act in according to the way that they were made, and to fulfill his decrees, this is the way that we understand God exercising and executing his sovereignty in the world. And so, because of this, we believe that "all things work together for good to those that love him and are called according to his purposes." Why can we believe that? Because we believe in God's eternal decree. We can say that we know that all things are going to work out the way that we find them in Scripture. Why can we say that? Because we believe in God's eternal decree. God is not hoping to work the world out. God designed the world exactly as it is, and it is doing and being everything he intended it to do and to be to maximize his glory.

##### **Dr. Bruce Baugus**

When we're studying systematic theology, we are trying to give a full and accurate and systematic statement of all that the Bible teaches. One of the things that we find the Bible teaching is about God's eternal counsel or his divine decrees. And so, in systematic theology, if we're doing our job, and we're trying to give a good representation of what the Bible teaches on all these matters that God has revealed to us, we need to pay some attention to the divine decree. It turns out to be a very rich topic with lots of implications for our theology. So, there are many questions that we have to reference to God's eternal will and what he has determined and foreordained to come to pass. We could think about this in terms of election, for example, in soteriology. We could think about the apologetic usefulness of, and necessity of, dealing with the decree at some level when it comes to the problem of evil, and why



would God have permitted the fall of Adam and Eve into sin to begin with? No system of theology can avoid these questions, and Scripture itself points us to God's eternal counsel, that he has willed whatsoever comes to pass. And so, we have to grapple with that. Paying attention to the divine decree and the full scope and range of biblical teaching on it will help us to be able to give accurate, theologically correct, that is, answers to, as far as we're able to go, as far as what God has revealed to us and made known to us about these and many other issues that we can't help but have to face along the way.

### **Question 12:**

#### **Why is God's glory so pervasive in the Bible?**

##### **Dr. Ramesh Richard**

God's glory is pervasive in Scripture because it is the fundamental reality of God himself in what we can attribute and ascribe to him. In Scripture, God's glory is integrative, it's crowning. It is also that which pervades every fiber of cosmic reality... But his glory is reverberating throughout all creation, throughout all humanity, through every microbe that can be examined by a microscope, and every distant star that can be looked at through a telescope, most of which we haven't found out yet... And so, the entire spiritual life, our relationship to God is governed by this final integrative teleology of God's glory, the weight of God in personal life and human existence.

##### **Dr. Scott Redd**

When the Bible talks about the whole earth being filled with the glory of God, it's really talking about the endpoint of its story. The divine story is not a tragedy; it's a comedy. And the way that we know that is because one day the whole earth will be filled with God's radiance. It will fill it in every nook and cranny so that, according to the symbolic imagery of the book of Revelation, there won't even need to be a sun because God's glory will light, it will radiate throughout all of the cosmos. We see that plan introduced in Genesis 1 where God creates man and woman in his image, and then he goes and tells them to fill the earth and subdue it, showing us that even all the way back in Genesis 1, God's plan was not merely to fill the garden but to fill the whole earth with his image, a worshiping image, reflecting back to him his glory. We see it take place in the call of the Psalter for not merely the nation of Israel but all nations, all kings, to worship the Lord. That's a global vision that we see all the way back in the Old Testament. And then, of course, the *modus operandi* for the gospel, which will be the Great Commission — the going out and proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ to the whole world, making disciples amongst the nations — is the means by which we have been given to fill the earth with God's glory now. In our lives today, we are called to go proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ all over the face of the earth. But again, we should take deep hope. This story is a comedy, and it will end with God's glory, his radiance lighting the whole world.

**Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.**

Glory is a theme that runs throughout the whole of Scripture. When God appears, he appears in his *kavod*, he appears in his glory. How do we know that God dwelled in the first temple? Well, the glory cloud, the pillar cloud would fill the temple. *Shekinah* is a post-biblical term, but nevertheless, we understand where God is, his glory is, his presence is. It's in the temple. In Ezekiel we have a vision of the glory leaving the temple to say, "That's it." God says, "I'm moving out. I'm done." Well, when the second temple was built, we didn't see God reoccupy the glory, but interestingly, in Luke 2 we have this amazing scene when Jesus is born, we see the glory of God in the sky over the shepherds. And what's Luke saying? He's saying, what we've been waiting for since the time of Ezekiel is the re-manifestation of glory. In all unlikely places, this glory, the presence of God that we haven't seen for centuries, appears to some shepherds in the field. John 1 puts it this way: "We have seen the glory of the one and only Son." And that glory, that presence, is concentrated and embodied in Jesus.

**Question 13:****What do theologians mean by the providence of God?****Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

The doctrine of providence is important because there is a strong tendency in the contemporary, scientific, modernistic mind to think of God as kind of like in the classic William Paley sense, a watchmaker, that essentially God kind of winds up everything. He makes it all, and he puts it all together and then he just kind of sets the clock running, and then it just goes on its own. And that is a classic error in relatively recent doctrines of God called Deism, the idea that God is not really integrally involved in creation. He is simply the source of creation, and he is the one who is kind of got it going, set it in motion, and now it just kind of does its own thing. But the doctrine of providence makes it very clear that God is not just kind of sitting back, or on vacation, or out having a lunch break, that his role in creation is integral and constant and continual, and he is involved in every aspect of sustaining and of overseeing and of moving and crafting and molding creation toward the purposes and plans that he has for it.

**Rev. Clete Hux**

Most theologians, when they talk about the providence of God, typically in a nutshell, they're really talking about God governing all things from start to finish and sustaining all things by his will and power.



**Question 14:****What do theologians mean when they say that God often operates through second causes?****Rev. Dan Hendley**

When theologians speak about God operating through, or using second causes, they just mean to say that God is the ultimate cause of all that occurs, but that there are additional causes that he may use. For example, God ordained that Jesus would be crucified, but to make that happen he used the betrayal of Judas Iscariot; he used the Jewish leaders who asked for Christ to be put to death; he used the cowardice of Pontius Pilate. All of those things that resulted in God's great plan of redemption being executed at Calvary with the atoning death of Jesus. So God planned it all. Peter comes in the book of Acts and he says, "What God had predetermined you carried out by the hands of godless men." So God was ultimately responsible for the great act of redemption that the atonement at Calvary would involve, but so were various human beings that contributed to that; they were secondary causes. I like to think of secondary causes, if I can use an illustration of billiards or pool in which a person will hold a cue stick, they will hit the cue ball, which will hit another ball, which will knock the eight ball into the corner pocket. How did the eight ball get into the corner pocket? What was responsible? Well, you can point to the cue ball and say that was responsible, you can point to the cue stick and say that was responsible, or you can point to the pool player who is holding the cue stick. In that illustration, maybe the player is the first cause and the other things are all secondary causes... So he's the ultimate cause of everything, but typically most often he uses other forces — human choices, natural forces as well — to bring to pass that which he has ordained.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

Theologians will talk about how God, he works through means, and he works through secondary causes, for example, and this is a very important category for a number of reasons. For one thing, it allows us to talk about God's performative will and God's permissive will. There are some things that God does do directly, and there are other things that God permits to his free creatures to do. He has equally ordained both of those things so that nothing that is happening is happening outside or contrary to his decretive will. And yet, it doesn't mean that he is directly performing all things. For example, God is not the author of sin, but he has decreed to permit sin — free creatures to act in evil and sinful and fallen ways. He has permitted that for a purpose. His purpose is entirely good, and his act of decreeing that is something he has performed, and yet he is not the direct doer of that evil... Now, this extends even more broadly. The world is full of actual entities that exist, and creatures, like human beings, for example, have spontaneity of will and have the ability to be able to act and do, and those are meaningful actions, that we are responsible for and accountable for, and yet, they are means that God is employing. But there's also properties that many other things have that they act in certain ways and along certain lines and have the ability to cause other events to come to pass, and God works through all of those means in a variety of ways in order to accomplish all of his purpose in this world.

**Dr. Tim Sansbury**

So, in the area of how God acts, there's a lot of things that all tie up together, and as I have tried to talk about this with students, I find that the crucifixion is one of the very best events that brings in God's eternal decree, his eternal plan, his works in history, and his use of secondary causes. And it even helps us to be able to look at the idea of God's eternal decree being for things that are evil events, and yet, God being innocent in them. But when we talk specifically about secondary causes, in the eternal decree of God, Christ was going to the cross for the sins of his people, and yet Christ did not go and walk himself up onto the cross. He gave himself over into the hands of a huge number of secondary causes, and one of the main ones was Judas. Judas, by his own will and his own desire, acting as a secondary cause, chose, for the purpose of getting pieces of silver to put into his hands, to turn his God and Savior and presumably his friend over to the Romans and to the Jews to be able to be crucified. So, Judas is acting on his own. He's an independent cause, he's a secondary cause of Christ going onto the cross, and yet the primary cause, the reason for it, is because God himself had ordained from all eternity that Christ would go onto the cross for the sins of his people and for their redemption.

**Dr. Samuel Lamerson**

One of the questions that we sometimes ask ourselves is, how can God use evil beings or countries or armies to work out good things, and that is that God often operates through what theologians call "secondary causes." So, for example, he might use a wicked army to defeat Israel and teach Israel a lesson about depending upon God rather than depending upon their own weapons and chariots. He uses Judas, for example. The Evil One enters into Judas in the Gospel of John. The only place in the entire Bible where Satan himself enters into someone is there in John when Judas goes to betray Christ. Judas goes to betray Christ as a result of the Evil One entering into him. That's clearly an evil and a terrible act, and yet God uses that evil and terrible act to get Christ crucified to create the greatest act in the world, and that is the act of the redemption of God's people. And so we see then God using secondary, and sometimes even evil causes to bring about his own will.

**Question 15:**

**Is there any aspect of God's creation that is outside the realm of God's authority or sovereignty?**

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry**

Well, I'd say that there is no part of God's creation that's outside of his authority... I mean, this is God's own doing. God cares for it. God provides for it. God sustains it through his word of power. It's sustained day by day. So, I wouldn't want to acknowledge there's anything beyond the realm of God's authority. He graciously allows us to operate within that realm with surprising freedom at times. But at the end of the day, everything is under the lordship of God; it's all his, even the bits that are

rebellious against him. They're still rebellious against his authority in the desire, of course, that God has that we will repent and turn back to him. But it's all God's creation, and it's all under his authority.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

The concept of God's sovereignty or authority really suggests, and I think if you clearly think it through, it suggests that there really isn't anything outside of creation that is beyond his authority, that he is in terms of being truly sovereign, being truly the ruler and Lord of all, truly the Creator and Master and King... And if God is in fact the Creator of all things and the Sustainer and the One who is moving his eternal purposes and plans forward in time and space, there is no way that anything could fall outside of that realm. It doesn't mean that he does not give allowance in the sense that he knows that some choices will be made in certain directions and sins will be committed... There is a sense and an amazing mystery that we have to talk about in terms of God's ability to oversee and his ability to create and work out his purposes and plans for our lives in light of the fact that there are things that happen that seem to be beyond his control... But ultimately, we have to recognize that in God's greater wisdom and in his ability to know the end from the beginning, even the horrific events and choices of people, even the catastrophes that happen, the natural disasters, all of those things are being worked out according to his plans and purposes so that nothing falls outside of his knowing and his allowing so that he might ultimately be glorified in the end.

**Question 16:**

**What power does Satan have in this world?**

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry**

Well, Satan does have substantial power in this world, the power of a fallen angel. Not just the only fallen angel. There are other fallen angels; we call them the demons who are roving powerfully around the world. Sometimes Jesus describes him, he described him as the prince of the earth, and that's a powerful description. I think we also want to always remember it's on the angelic level. He's an angel, not God, not a divine being. So, it's a substantial power, a spiritual power, but not God's power. And so what we want to remember when we do think about the power of the devil and the demons, we don't want to trivialize that in any way or play it down. I mean, anyone who's seen anything like an exorcism knows this is really serious material we're talking about here. But we also remember it's not some sort of equal power to the power of God. God is the creator of the angels, even those that fell into this crisis that we now see them in. But the name of Jesus is above their names. And so, if we're thinking about that demonic power that is at work in the world, we've got to acknowledge that. In Anglican prayers we talk about the world, the flesh and the Devil. It's not just the Devil that we're up against but the world and all its fallenness and our own sinful frailties, but we want to recognize there is this demonic power at work which we need to take seriously, although not become too awed by, but when

we're dealing with that power remember the power the name of Jesus, the blood of Jesus is more powerful even than the power of the prince of this world who has been defeated already by this Jesus Christ, and will, in the end, be banished to hell for which hell was created so that he could be properly put to the place where he belongs.

**Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

The question of Satan's power in this world is a very interesting and perhaps somewhat tricky one. We all want to assert that God is sovereign; God is all-powerful, that nothing happens without God being in overall control. And yet, it's very clear that the world is not as it should be. Not only human beings do wicked things, but random evil things happen to people all the time — cancer, illness, what we used to call "acts of God," moments of terror and devastation that seem to have no rhyme or reason to them. It would seem to imply that there is a force of evil at work within the world. I think the book of Job is very helpful here. Job begins with these very mysterious courtroom scenes, the heavenly courtroom where — literally the word is "the Satan" — the Accuser appears before the Lord and is given power by God to wreak havoc upon Job's life. So the first thing I think we need to note about the power of Satan in this world is that Satan is real, his power is terrifying and very, very significant. But, of course, the book of Job doesn't end there. One of the things that's interesting about the heavenly courtroom scene, and indeed about the Lord's speeches right at the end of Job, is the Lord makes it very clear that Satan has no power that is not circumscribed by the power of God; Satan has no power that is not ultimately averted by the power of God. So, if we were to take an individual example and, say, look at death, something we all face. You know, when somebody dies there is a sense in which we see the evil havoc of Satan being wreaked upon their lives and seems to be all-powerful and supreme. And yet, we know that in Christ there's a resurrection that the Lord has been good to that principle laid out in Job that Satan and evil will ultimately have no power, which he has not circumscribed and overcome. So, to return to the question, what power does Satan have in this world? I would say that Satan has perhaps the second-most supreme power of anything in the created realm. He's awesomely powerful, he's to be taken with utmost seriousness, he is not to be underestimated at any cost, but we must also remember that for all of his supreme power, there is one even more powerful than Satan, the Lord God, and he has bound Satan in a decisive way so that Satan's power is restricted now. Even death cannot tear the saint away from the Lord. His power is restricted now and will be definitively crushed at the end of time.

**Question 17:**

**What aspects of God's extraordinary providence can we call miracles?**

**Rev. Dan Hendley**

The definition of a miracle is variously understood within the Christian church, and many people think of things that are highly unlikely as a miracle. Maybe I run into a friend I haven't seen for 20 years in a distant airport somewhere, and that may be an

act of God's providence, but I don't think it's properly understood to be a miracle. A miracle, in a more technical definition, is something that God works in the context of human history that is *contrary* to the natural order, such as a man rising from the dead or walking on water, or transforming water into wine, or healing a blind man by just touching him. These are things that violate natural laws, which God of course is free and perfectly capable of doing. And so, that's how I would define a miracle, and it testifies to the power of God and attests to those who represent him on the earth as prophets and certainly as Jesus was represented as the Son of God through the miracles that he did.

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider**

God's providential care of his creation is comprehensive, by which I mean nothing happens in God's world that isn't part of God's plan, not part of his eternal decrees or what would be accomplished in his world. But God accomplishes his plans in a variety of ways. He uses human choices, human decisions. He uses satanic actions. He uses what we would call natural events to accomplish his plan. But there are times when God supernaturally, non-normatively, exceptionally intervenes and does an act, which only God could do. We call those miracles. They are not the normative way that God works in his world. And it's not so much that they are spectacular but that they are non-normative, extraordinary, unexpected instances where God intervenes and acts in his world.

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Through the centuries it's been popular, among some branches of the church anyway, to distinguish between what we might call "ordinary providence," the way God normally takes care of things in the world and supervises the unfolding of history — which is normally according to things like natural law and things like that — and to distinguish ordinary providence from "extraordinary providence," which would be when God does things in the world more directly, or beyond, above, without and against second causes or creaturely causes. And in common Christian parlance we would call many of those extraordinary providences miracles. Now, I don't have a problem with calling them miracles because I think the Bible actually calls these kinds of things miracles as well, but there is a thread of theological discussion that needs to be acknowledged. Many times theologians, systematic theologians will reserve the word "miracle" as a technical word to describe only the set of extraordinary providences of God that are used to authenticate and authorize some spokesman for God, like the miracles of Jesus being used to authorize him, to show that he is the Son of God, or the prophet Elijah and his various miracles proving or demonstrating that he was the prophet of God. And because we don't believe that special revelation continues now, a lot of theologians want to argue therefore we should not say there are any miracles now, because miracles, they argue, as a technical term, are actually only for authenticating signs for authoritative spokesmen or spokespeople for God. And that's okay. I mean you can understand so long as you don't go too far with that, that they're using the word miracle in a very special way, a very technical way to mean an authenticating sign. But in reality, the Bible doesn't use the miracle terms just for that... But even those who reserve the word miracle for

authenticating signs for God's spokesmen, and therefore say they don't occur anymore today, they know that God still does extraordinary things. He answers prayers, he heals the sick; he does things that you could not have predicted on the basis of natural law. And he does this many, many times in the life of believers and even in the lives of unbelievers... But above all, we have to say that there are still extraordinary providences occurring even in our day, and we have to be open to that and seeking for those things, because it's in those kinds of special providences, the unusual things that God does, that we find the greatest blessings and the greatest encouragements in the Christian faith.

---

**Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.** is Associate Professor of Theology and Director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College.

**Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.** is Dean of Seminary at Africa Christian University in Zambia.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Rick Boyd** is Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

**Dr. D. A. Carson** is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Co-founder of The Gospel Coalition.

**Dr. William Edgar** is Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Bruce L. Fields** is Chair of the Biblical and Systematic Theology Department and Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Benjamin Gladd** is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Dan Hendley** is Senior Pastor of North Park Church in Wexford, PA.

**Rev. Clete Hux** is Director and Counter-Cult Apologist at Apologetics Resource Center, a Christian ministry which encompasses the full range of Christian Apologetics.

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider** is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Samuel Lamerson** is President of Knox Theological Seminary and Professor of New Testament.

**Dr. Richard Lints** is Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Scott Manor** is Assistant Professor of Historical Theology, Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Dean of Faculty at Knox Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Josh Moody** is Senior Pastor at College Church in Wheaton, IL.

**Dr. Grant R. Osborne** is Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Nicholas Perrin (Ph.D.)** is the Franklin S. Dyrness Professor of Biblical Studies and Dean of the Graduate School at Wheaton College.

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.** is President of Third Millennium Ministries and Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

**Dr. Scott Redd** is Campus President of Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington D.C. and Assistant Professor of Old Testament.

**Dr. Ramesh Richard** is Professor of Global Theological Engagement and Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Philip Ryken** is President of Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL.

**Dr. Tim Sansbury** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theology and Vice President of Administration at Knox Theological Seminary.

**Rev. George Shamblin** serves at Birmingham Theological Seminary and The Center for Executive Leadership.

**Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry** is Dean and President of Trinity School for Ministry. He is also Professor of Systematic Theology.

**Dr. Carl R. Trueman** is Professor of Historical Theology and Church History and the Paul Woolley Chair of History at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania.

**Dr. Sanders L. Willson** is Senior Minister at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, TN and serves on the boards of The Gospel Coalition, Union University and Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler** is resident faculty member of Theological and Historical Studies at East Asia School of Theology.